

MAKING SENSE OF FEMALE CEOS' LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION: DOES THE MALE-FEMALE MIX OF THE WORKPLACE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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Maxine Osborn

Department of Management, Marketing and
Entrepreneurship

College of Business and Law

University of Canterbury

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Abstract

This study examines how female CEOs make sense of their communication with subordinates in three different types of organisations: those with predominantly female staff, those with predominantly male staff, and organisations where neither sex predominates. As this study sought to understand how female CEOs made sense of their leader-member communication experiences, an interpretive research design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 female CEOs from a range of sectors throughout New Zealand. Thematic analysis was applied to the data to produce a framework that explains how female CEOs experience leader-member communication in organisations with workforces of different sex compositions. This framework proposes that personal style, sociocultural background and organisational size were perceived by the CEOs as having a greater influence on leader-member communication than the sex of the CEO or subordinate. The framework also suggests that male and female gender stereotypes were being applied in some sensemaking accounts, despite CEOs' assertions that these did not affect leader-member communication. This finding suggests the presence of an unconscious bias that is at odds with the CEOs' stated beliefs about workplace leader-member communication. This is an important finding as it suggests a tension exists between explicit and tacit expectations, which has the potential to influence communication between CEOs and their subordinates. A major inference of this study is that CEOs would benefit from consciousness training to help identify this unconscious bias and strategize ways to minimise the effect it has on their workplace communication expectations and practices.

Keywords: sensemaking, female CEOs, leader-member communication, mix of sexes, gender-stereotypes, unconscious bias

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Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Chapter 1: Introduction to Research.....	6
1.1 Outline.....	6
1.2 Description of the Research Process.....	7
1.3 Thesis Outline.....	8
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	9
2.1 Introduction.....	9
2.2 Organisational Communication.....	9
2.3 Leadership Communication.....	11
2.4 Female Leadership.....	13
2.5 Gender Stereotypes.....	15
2.6 Gender and Communication.....	19
2.6.1 Gender and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory.....	20
2.7 Sensemaking.....	21
2.7.1 Gender and Sensemaking.....	24
2.8 Discussion and Conclusion.....	24
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	27
3.1 Introduction.....	27
3.2 Philosophical Considerations: Choosing a research paradigm.....	27
3.3 Data Collection.....	30
3.3.1 Selection Criteria.....	30
3.3.2 Sample Recruitment.....	31
3.3.3 Semi-structured Interviews.....	33
3.4 Transcription.....	34
3.5 Data Analysis.....	34
3.5.1 Thematic Analysis:.....	34
3.6 Evaluating Research Quality.....	36
3.6.1 Credibility.....	37
3.6.2 Transferability.....	37
3.6.3 Dependability.....	38
3.6.4 Confirmability.....	38
3.7 Ethical Considerations.....	39
3.8 Summary.....	39
Chapter Four: Findings.....	41

4.1 Introduction	41
4.2 Category 1 - Interlocutor Profile	42
4.2.1 Sociocultural Background	42
4.2.2 Age-related Effects	47
4.2.3 Personal Style	51
4.3 Category 2 - Organisational Profile	55
4.3.1 Size	56
4.3.2 Organisational Culture	58
4.4 Category 3 - Gender Stereotypes	63
4.4.1 Unconscious Gender Bias	68
4.4.2 Training	70
4.5 Conclusion	71
Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion	73
5.1 Introduction	73
5.2 Interlocutor Profile	73
5.2.1 Sociocultural Background	73
5.2.2 Age-related Effects	75
5.2.3 Personal Style	76
5.3. Organisational Profile	78
5.3.1 Size	78
5.3.2 Organisational Culture	79
5.4 Gender Stereotypes	81
5.4.1 Unconscious Bias	82
5.4.2 Training	83
5.5 Research Implications	83
5.6 Limitations of Research and Future Studies	85
5.7 Conclusion	86
5.7.1 Theoretical Contributions	87
5.7.2 Practical Contributions	88
References	90
Appendices	114

Chapter 1: Introduction to Research

1.1 Outline

Leadership communication studies have in the past had a disproportional number of male research participants, due to senior positions in workplaces historically being dominated by men (Parker, 2001). Although the last 30 years has seen a dramatic increase in the number of women in the workplace, the amount reaching top management positions has remained relatively small (Dreher, 2003) and there continues to be a significant imbalance in favour of men in top leadership positions across the world (Esser, 2018). Women are still portrayed as being at a disadvantage when seeking leadership roles, as well as facing prejudice and conflict when they occupy these positions (Eagly, 2007). There is a substantial body of literature confirming that women face more barriers to becoming leaders than men, but there are few studies addressing communication between men and women when the latter do attain top leadership roles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Not surprisingly, since female CEOs are still much less common than male CEOs, the sense they make of their experiences in top leadership roles is not well documented. In particular, there is a paucity of studies looking at females' leader communication. The few studies in the area of male-female communication in the workplace mostly draw on leader-member exchange theory and tend to focus on subordinates' perceptions of communication (Mueller & Lee, 2002). The lack of research seems to be linked to the debate among scholars as to whether a gender difference in communication actually exists, or is big enough to be significant (Carli 2006; Wilkinson & Anderson, 1991). This study was prompted by curiosity as to how female CEOs experience communication with subordinates, and by the conviction that, communication is the most fundamental organisational process (Robertson, 2005). Studies that advance our understanding of the role that the sex mix of the subordinates plays in female leaders' communication and how they make sense of this communication may help to explain why a significant participation gap between men and women at the top of organisations still exists. It will also add to the scant empirical research on female executives and their communication experience (Lyness & Thompson, 1997).

This thesis examines 12 female CEOs' experiences of leader-member communication in three different situations, in order to address the gap in the literature. Utilizing a qualitative interpretive research approach, this Masters study is an in-depth investigation into how female CEOs make sense of their communication experiences and how this is affected by the male-female composition of their organisation. Where the word "gender" is used in this study it refers only to male and female genders. It was not possible to study other genders due to the absence of data allowing other genders to be identified. The term sex is used whenever possible, however, it should be noted that the term gender was often more appropriate for two reasons. First, the study reported in this thesis is interpretive, and thus trying to capture participants' experiences from their own point of view, and participants showed a predisposition to use the term gender in their sensemaking accounts as a synonym for biological sex. Second, sometimes the participants were referring to the psychological, social and cultural differences between the sexes and so were not simply referring to sex.

1.2 Description of the Research Process

A qualitative research design consistent with an interpretive ontology and epistemology was utilised in this study. This was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do female executives experience and make sense of their communication experiences in predominantly male organisations?
2. Do these experiences differ from female executives leading predominantly female, or mixed-sex organisations?

Semi structured interviews were conducted with 12 female CEOs from across several industry sectors in New Zealand. Transcriptions of the interviews were completed and a thematic analysis of the data was conducted. The thematic analysis identified the range of themes employed in the CEOs' accounts of their communication with subordinates. These were then compared and categorised to develop a framework that explained how the CEOs made sense of leader-member communication in three types of gender mix organisation. The findings of this comparative thematic analysis are presented in Chapter Four. The findings suggest that the CEOs downplayed the influence of sex as a factor explaining their communication experiences, however their

accounts of communication experience suggest that male/female gender stereotyping and unconscious bias are an integral part of their sensemaking behaviour.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis is made up of five chapters. The present chapter has highlighted the proposed research and research questions, as well as providing justification for the chosen subject area.

Chapter Two, Literature Review, provides a review and discussion of literature relating to the main concepts of this study: communication, leadership, sex/gender and sensemaking. The chapter also discusses the gaps in these areas, which provided the context and motivation for this study.

Chapter Three, Methodology, describes and justifies the research design chosen to answer the research questions. The chapter includes a detailed description of the philosophical considerations, as well as the data collection and analysis techniques.

Chapter Four, Findings, presents the results of the comparative thematic analysis.

Finally, Chapter Five, Discussion and Conclusion, presents a discussion of the main findings, how they relate to previous literature, their theoretical and practical contributions, and the new insights gained from this study. The limitations of the research and opportunities for future studies are also provided.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following chapter reviews the relevant literature addressing leadership communication, more specifically, female leadership communication. Initially, literature pertaining to the importance of communication in organisations is presented, before focus is shifted to the relationship between communication and leadership. The review then highlights the stereotypical behaviours women leaders are seen to exhibit. Specific emphasis is placed on gender stereotyping. Stereotyping is a socially embedded process and so the stereotype is a social construction. This means that gender, as opposed to sex, is the appropriate designator for these stereotypes even though the words gender and sex are often used interchangeably (as noted in the Introduction). In this instance the term gender is the appropriate term. Literature on gender, as a term including sex, and communication is then explored, followed by a brief review of the extensive work on sensemaking theory, which is adopted in this research. The review concludes with a discussion of the gaps identified in the existing literature and the opportunities for further research on female communication in differing gender-mix organisations.

2.2 Organisational Communication

Hackman and Johnson (2013) define communication as the ‘transfer of symbols which allows individuals to create meaning’ (p.5), and, like others, considered it to be a fundamental organisational processes (Robertson, 2005). Without communication it would be impossible to expand a simple workspace into an integrated and functional system, allowing organisational goals to be achieved (Mills, 2002). While research approaches to the subject of organisational communication are diverse (Elving, 2005), there is little disagreement surrounding the fundamental purpose of communication in achieving organisational goals (Sypher & Zorn, 1985, Elving, 2005; Peng & Litteljohn, 2001). Communication provides the means by which organisational members collaboratively construct their organisational realities, serving both as an instrument for informing and as a means for interpreting their experiences (Mills, 2002).

Early communication theories portray communication as a way to share information, capture ideas and ensure information correspondence (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2018). Communication was historically seen as just one of the numerous activities occurring inside the pre-existing walls of an organisation (Schoeneborn et al. 2018), but over time, scholars have come to view communication as more pervasive. As a result, the Communication Constitutes Organisations (CCO) perspective has been gaining considerable attention (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012). Expanding on Weick's belief that "the communication activity is the organisation" (Weick, 1995, p.75), the CCO perspective adopts the view that communication is not merely expressive of social realities but is in fact generative and constitutive (Wright, 2016). Consequently, from this perspective, organisations are no longer viewed as entities in which communication occurs but are seen as 'precarious accomplishments' realised exclusively in the communication processes (Cooren, Kuhen, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). The CCO perspective has caused a major revision in the field, with scholars proposing that instead of envisioning communication as something that happens in organisation; studies should look at how organisations happen in communication (Schoeneborn et al. 2018). From the CCO perspective, communication techniques almost completely determine the structure, extensiveness and scope of the organisation, which leads to an organisation being described as an integrated communication system (Beckett, 2003). Positive outcomes associated with a shift to the CCO perspective include improved productivity, increased innovation and reduced absenteeism (Blaschke et al., 2012, Kanter, 1988).

In summary, the way the relationship of communication to the organisation is perceived has changed as scholars have moved from an instrumental to a constitutive perspective that views organisations as socially constructed through communication (Schoeneborn, 2011). Whether or not a scholar adopts the CCO perspective, which proposes that without communication the organisation fails to exist, the literature is united in the view that communication is of great importance to an organisation and especially to its leaders. This study adopts the CCO perspective, which informs the researcher's view that communication is essential not only to an organisations existence but also to its success and growth. The CCO perspective is evident in the research questions, which focus on the female CEOs and their sensemaking of communication experiences. Since leaders are said to play an important part in setting the tone of communication within

the organisation, influencing employee attitudes and behaviour (Men, 2015), studying a leader's communication experiences allows a greater understanding of an entire organisation.

2.3 Leadership Communication

If organisations are indeed built, maintained and activated through the medium of communication (Weick, 2001), then by association, organisational leadership is as well. Leadership however, is a complex concept, largely because it has been studied from countless other perspectives and disciplines (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008). Kaiser, Hogan and Craig (2008) state that the literature on leadership is extensive but makes 'useful generalizations about the links between personality, cognitive ability, leadership style, and evaluations of leadership potential and performance' (p. 96). In an article reviewing 14 years of leadership theory, Meuser, et al. (2016) conclude that leadership scholars tend to focus on theories which are central to their investigation, often not considering how their own theory works with other theories in leadership literature. With an abundance of theories and behavioural constructs being used in literature, Yukl (2012) states that it is difficult for findings to be compared and integrated. "Implicit leadership theory" has been used to explain why there are so many contradictory empirical studies and texts addressing leadership. The theory explains the preconceptions that individuals hold about the traits and characteristics intrinsic to a leader (Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, & Coyle, 2017). Implicit leadership theory changes according to the person employing it (Meindl, 1995), which has resulted in numerous different studies, theories and constructs related to leadership.

To avoid having to define leadership, scholars have put a great deal of emphasis on attributes such as personality characteristics, traits, styles, and desirable leader behaviour (Rost, 1993). These attributes are used in leadership theories and continue to evolve, with the end goal to distil the essence of what makes an effective leader (Ulrich & Smallwood 2012). Common theories include "Transformational leadership" (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Ghasabeh, Soosay, & Reaiche, 2015), "Charismatic leadership" (Yukl, 1999; House & Shamir, 1993), "Servant leadership" (Hunter et al., 2013; Sims & Morris, 2018; Sun & Shang, 2019) and many others. As a result of these scholarly

contributions, the idea has evolved that the quality of communication can be a factor explaining both successful and unsuccessful leadership (Schnurr, 2008).

Tourish and Hargie (2004) argue that a focused communication strategy is at the heart of any effective organisational leadership. Similarly, De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, and Oostenveld (2010) argue that a leader's interpersonal communicational style is a core element of leadership. Some scholars go so far as to assert that effective leadership is dependent on the communication competency of the leader (e.g., Flauto, 1999; Riggio, Riggio, Salinas & Cole, 1999; Barrett, 2006). Fairhurst (2011) also adopts this view, concluding that 'framing' is an essential communication skill of a leader. As the CCO perspective has taken hold, scholars have increasingly proposed that communication is more than an additional feature of leadership; it is actually "fundamentally grounded and rooted in the communication process" (Schnurr, 2008 p. 299). Hackman and Johnson (2013) consider leadership as "human communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviours of others to meet shared goals" (p. 33). This communication-based view of leadership emphasises that communication is central to all leadership functions, but especially for motivating, encouraging and guiding subordinates (Schnurr, 2008). With communication and leadership inextricably linked (Flauto 1999; Boies, Fiset, & Gill, 2005), there is value in understanding how leaders make sense of their communication experiences, specifically the CEOs who play a vital role in the leadership of an organisation.

In terms of leadership roles, the chief executive officer (CEO) is normally the highest-ranking individual, with responsibility for the achievement of goals (Sherlock & Nathan, 2007). Holding the most powerful position in the organisation, the CEO's behaviour, views and values can impact on the entire direction of an organisation (Daily & Johnson, 1997). The unique role of the CEO also involves influencing aspects of the organisation that other senior leaders do not have to consider (Men, 2015). Feelings of loneliness and isolation are common among those in CEO roles due to power dynamics that exist between the CEO and both the board members and staff (Sherlock & Nathan, 2007). For instance, when an individual reaches the most senior position, relationships that existed at a lower management level are no longer the same (Cooper & Quick, 2003). With female CEOs still being the minority, the sense that they make of this transition and their experiences in this role are not well documented. The extant

literature surrounding female CEOs is instead largely focused on the gender gap in top management positions (Khan & Vieito, 2013; Wolfers, 2006; Martin, Nishikawa, & Williams, 2009). In a study comparing the life and career trajectories of male and female CEOs, Fitzsimmons, Callan, and Paulsen (2014) looked at the origin of gender inequality in leadership positions. Other leadership scholars also tend to focus on the cause of executive gender gaps, rather than exploring the experiences that female CEOs have in these positions (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Bertrand & Hallock, 2001; Bell, 2005). With the number of female CEOs gradually increasing over time, but a knowledge gap in terms of their experiences in these positions still evident, it is becoming increasingly important to study those who have already broken the 'glass ceiling' (Adams & Funk, 2012; Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2008; Pardhan, 2018).

2.4 Female Leadership

Leadership communication studies in the past have had a disproportional number of male research participants (Parker, 2001). This is evident in early definitions of leadership, which concentrate on masculine strategies such as directness, authoritativeness and dominance (Marra, Schnurr, & Holmes, 2006). Not until the 1970s, when some women were finally appointed to management positions, did researchers begin seeking to identify differences in male and female leadership (Wilkins & Anderson, 1991). In a very early study comparing the leadership styles of men and women, Chapman (1975) found that due to men and women being conditioned by societal expectations, women, when placed in leadership positions, could demonstrate more relationship-orientated behaviour than their male counterparts. The concept of leadership has shifted over time and what has emerged is a less individualistic and a more relational concept (Fletcher, 2004). Scholars have also begun to argue that the idea of leadership indicates a feminine orientation, signalling that organisations actually need female leaders (Due-Billing & Alvesson, 2000). One accompanying argument in favour of female leadership is that, in order to deal with complex demands of the twenty-first century workplace, leaders will need to show behaviours which have been traditionally associated with women, but which many females have had to conceal in order to gain success in their careers (Lipman-Blumen 1992).

The 'mothering metaphor' has been used to explain typical female leadership behaviour (Elgamal, 2012) and is based on the idea that women are more empathetic, nurturing and deferential than men (Lumby & Azaola, 2014). Typical female leadership behaviours have also been related to transformational leadership (Eagly, 2007). In the early 90s, when social, economic and organisational environments were rapidly changing, the need for transformational leaders in the workplace increased (Druskat, 1994). Since then, transformational leadership has been associated more with female leaders, as research has found that women are less likely to impose authority on subordinates and are more likely to have transformational and contingent reward styles (Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz, 2015). The association between female leaders and transformational leadership has led to the relationship between masculine qualities and successful leadership coming under scrutiny (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). A woman's presence in corporate leadership is also said to reduce discriminatory attitudes toward females (Noland, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016). This suggests that to ensure gender equality in an organisation, female leaders are needed.

Despite the advantages of female leadership being proposed in the literature, Schnurr (2008) argues that females have still not gained any advantages in terms of being selected for roles, particularly in male dominated professions. This is evident with a significant male-female gender gap in top leadership positions still prevalent worldwide (Esser, 2018). Women are still seen as the exception to the male norm in leadership and thus face a double bind in terms of professionalism and femininity (Marra, Schnurr, & Holmes, 2006). They also still face more barriers when trying to attain executive positions than males (Jones & Palmer, 2011; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011; Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). Although there is a vast amount of literature on barriers for women in organisations, there is little knowledge on whether their sex and associated gender impact on the success of the leader once they do attain a top role (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Most significantly, there is little empirical research on executive women and their communication experiences, though anecdotal accounts from managerial women suggest that their experiences are probably different from their male counterparts (Lyness & Thompson 1997). Literature that does consider women who have gained leadership roles tends to focus on creating coping and resistance strategies for female leaders in male dominated organisations (Oakley,

2000). However, as noted already, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of communication in this context (Schnurr, 2008). It is known that women in management downplay the feminine aspects of their appearance in order to integrate themselves into male dominated work environments (Oakley, 2000) yet the literature pays less attention to how female leaders draw on various discursive strategies, apart from some studies on the use of humour (Schnurr & Holmes, 2009; Holmes, 2008).

As stated above, communication is central to all leadership functions (Schnurr, 2008) therefore it is important to study the experiences of both males and females in leadership positions to ensure a thorough understanding of this effect. Studying the sensemaking of women who have reached executive positions may give greater insight into the expectations they face and the impact this has on their experiences as leaders. Studying female executives in organisations with differing mixes of sexes also adds to literature concerning the impact of sex and associated gender on communication.

2.5 Gender Stereotypes

Throughout the leadership and communication literature the term ‘gender’ is used when exploring the differences between males and females. Although many scholars use the term gender interchangeably with sex, the two have different meanings (Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz 2015). Sex was traditionally defined as the biological differences between men and women, whereas gender is associated with the psychological, social and cultural differences between the sexes (Wodak, 1997). As explained in the introduction to this chapter, gender is seen to be socially constructed in interactions, rather than as a fixed social category that is assigned at birth (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). The notion of gender developed from the ascription and reinforcement of male and female sex roles. From early times, societies divided human characteristics into two categories and attributed half to males and half to females (Delphy, 1993). Beliefs about the nature of men and women and their place in society were handed down from one generation to the next and quickly became matters that were taken for granted (Archer & Lloyd, 2002). Although gender is not assigned at birth it does build on sex by exaggerating biological differences and by matching certain ways of behaving with each sex (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Knowledge and understanding of physical sex has changed over the years and society has begun to discover the diversity that

exists within populations (Johnson & Repta, 2012), but at some level people usually assume that they are either engaging with a man or a woman (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008).

There is still a strong tendency to highlight the difference between the sexes by explaining males and females in gender-stereotypical ways (Due-Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Stereotypes are the cognitive shortcuts used to process information about groups on the basis of their race, sex, age, religion or other characteristics (Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz 2015). They help set expectations around a group's attributes and how its members should behave (Ginige, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2007). Gender stereotypes are relevant in every social interaction and have an undeniable, ever-present influence on how people behave, whether they are aware of it or not (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008). For example, people routinely use gender assumptions when choosing with whom they communicate, and also when deciding what they deem to be appropriate behaviour (Acker, 2006). In a study examining gender stereotypes and workplace bias, Heilman (2012) concluded that gender stereotypes impact the way males and females are treated in organisations by promoting gender bias and creating normative standards of behaviour. In another study comparing gender stereotypes from 1983-2014 it was found that gender stereotyping was consistent and stable throughout those years (Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro, 2016). Fairman (2016) also states that although it may not be as overtly acknowledged as it was in the past, sex and gender binaries still exist in people's minds. Given that sex is biologically determined and gender is socially constructed and enacted, it is important to distinguish the differences between gender and sex in order to recognize which of the two is actually influencing individuals' (e.g., female CEOs) behaviour and experiences in organisations, and how this should be interpreted.

Gender stereotypes are often sculpted at a young age by parents and authority figures (Eccles, 1999). Risman (2017) states that the gender-structure (generation) into which a person is born will also influence their perceptions of gender. In a study of British adolescents it was found that boys were encouraged by teachers to be assertive in classroom interaction and were admired for this behaviour, while girls who demonstrated the same attributes were not admired at all (Talbot, 2008). In another study Herbert and Stipek (2005) demonstrated that stereotypes influences perceptions of academic competence in children, with parents and students alike rating boys' maths

skills higher than that of girls. The parents' rating of their child was also found to be a strong predictor of how children viewed their own academic skills. Kulik (1995) found that the ethnic origin of an individual, and thus the culture they were brought up in, also has an impact on their perceptions of gender. The findings showed that Israeli students had more liberal attitudes towards gender roles than other immigrants in the study. These studies give us the idea that gender effects are multifaceted and can be influenced by other demographics such as age and culture.

Stereotyping often carries on from childhood and cultural upbringing into adulthood and into the workplace, where Schnurr (2008) states that female leaders are burdened with the task of trying to balance their professional and gender identities. Gender stereotyping has historically resulted in discrimination against females in the workplace, as only men were considered sufficiently dominant, aggressive and competitive to gain the respect of subordinates necessary for success (Osborn & Vicars, 1976). Women were seen to lack the leadership attributes and abilities required for managerial positions, as they were associated with being gentle, sensitive, and passive (Brown 1979). More recent studies looking at gender stereotyping in the workplace still tend to focus on the negative impacts of stereotyping on female workers. Research examining narratives of sex discrimination in 216 organisations found that gender stereotypes lead to a view that women are incompatible with specific jobs in a variety of organisational contexts (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). Given such findings it is not surprising that Heilman (2001) proposes that stereotypes around how women should behave can also lead to their performance being diminished, or to them being denied credit for their successes.

In a study by Heilman and Block (1995), it was found that female managers were characterised more negatively than their fellow male managers. Even when female managers were seen to be successful, participants in the study described them as more hostile and less rational than male managers (Heilman & Block, 1995). In a similar study examining the perceptions of managers, Deal and Stevenson (1998) found that male participants rated female managers less favourably, using terms such as bitter, passive and deceitful. In addition, Schnurr (2008) states that when women adopt more masculine leadership qualities they are often called bitter or selfish, whereas men are praised. Studying female CEOs in different sex-mix organisations will give a greater

insight into the how the make-up of an organisation influences gender stereotyping, as well as how these stereotypes affect communication between the CEO and her subordinates.

Gender stereotyping also contributes to the belief that females have different leadership styles compared to their male counterparts (Crites, Dickson, & Lorenz, 2015). Since men have in the past held most executive positions, their leadership style has been historically associated with success. Gardiner and Tiggemann (1999) highlight also that the stereotypical masculine leader is often associated with achievement of organisational goals, whereas the stereotypical feminine leader focuses on people and relationships, an attribute that historically has not seen to be important in leadership (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Vinkenbunrg, Van Engen, Eagly, and Johannesen-Schmidt (2011) state that if the person making the decision about a work promotion believes that a woman's leadership style is different from a man's, then the woman may struggle to be promoted. This finding has serious implications for women workers. For instance, in a review article on the advantages and disadvantages of female leadership, Eagly (2007) claimed that stereotypes cause many females to reconcile their expectations of themselves as women with the way others expect them to behave as leaders. This in turn affects the way they communicate. Holmes (2008) found that an individual's communication style at work is anything but uniform. She argues that gender stereotypes and gendered norms about how female and males communicate are being used in every interaction (Holmes, 2008).

Gender stereotypes may be evident in every interaction, but the effect this has on leader-member communication, particularly female leaders' communication experiences, has not been greatly documented. There is a vast amount of literature about the performance-debilitating effects of stereotyping women in the workplace (von Hippel, Wiryakusuma, Bowden & Shocket, 2011), yet there is still little research on how this influences the way female leaders interact and communicate with individuals of the opposite sex, and vice versa.

2.6 Gender and Communication

Baker (1991) states that one of the most influential stereotypes for both men and women is the expectation that they have different styles of communicating. Men are believed to communicate in a direct, authoritative and impersonal manner, while women in contrast are expected to express themselves in a more cautious, receptive and subjective manner (Baker, 1991; Coates, 2015). Whether or not there actually is a communication difference between men and women, or whether the difference is significant enough to be of importance, has been greatly debated among scholars (Carli, 2006; Wilkinson & Anderson, 1991).

Language, like gender, is not determined at birth. Children are influenced by the parents and other figures of authority who encourage them to adopt gender-specific ways of speaking (Wodak, 1997). Researchers have investigated the relationship between gender and communication variables from a number of perspectives, including a variety of studies focusing on language (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008). In Holmes' (2006) study on humour and gender in the workplace it was found that women were more likely to participate in conjoint humour while men tended to use contestive humour sequences. Sheridan (2009) also found that a linguistic difference is evident between men and women when one examines the topics they choose to discuss in the workplace. Men are said to talk in general terms while women are said to talk about more personal topics such as family, friendships and emotions (Sheridan, 2009). Tannen (1994) states that for women, language is primarily used for building rapport, while for men, talk is largely used to negotiate and maintain social order. Carli (2006) claims that generally research has indicated a gender difference in workplace communication, and that this is in line with stereotypical beliefs around how men and women communicate. This being said, scholars have not yet come to a general consensus on the topic, therefore studying the sensemaking of female CEOs offers the potential to develop a greater insight into how gender affects communication.

The culture (i.e. nurture) argument is in favour of the claim that there is a difference in how male and females communicate. It is based on the idea that much of what we know about interpersonal communication is taught by same-sex peers between the ages of five to fifteen years (Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001). This is part of the argument for

the social construction of gender, which posits that society creates stereotypical ways of viewing female and male communication (Postmes & Spears, 2002). Merchant (2012) states that women use communication as a tool to enhance social connections and create relationships, while men tend to use language as a way to exert dominance and achieve outcomes. The biggest difference between male and female communication styles is attributed to the fact that men and women tend to view the purpose of conversations differently (Merchant, 2012). Studies on female leadership and communication have shown that a feminine linguistic style can help establish rapport and encourage the speaking partner (i.e. interlocutor) to respond, but it is the stereotypical masculine characteristics that are often seen as prerequisites for effective leadership (von Hippel, et al., 2011).

In research undertaken across a range of New Zealand contexts, males were found to dominate public interactions, as they talk more, ask more questions and interrupt more often (Marra, Schnurr, & Holmes, 2006). Sheridan (2009) states that in mixed sex conversations, men interrupt women more often than they do other men. According to Roter, Hall, and Aoki (2002), women go to greater lengths to downplay their own status in an attempt to equalise status, whereas men tend to try to assert status difference. Scholars have tested similar interactions in the workplace by asking subordinates to describe their manager's behaviour (e.g., Birdsall, 1980). In a study looking at the nature of communication between managers and their subordinates it was found that female subordinates perceived fewer opportunities for communication with their managers (Callan, 1993). There is extensive literature about workers' perceptions of exchanges with their boss (Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, 2002; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009; Leow, 2011). These exchanges are typically called leader-member exchanges, studies of which have given rise to Leader-member Exchange Theory (Bakar, Mohamad, & Mustafa, 2007).

2.6.1 Gender and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) is based on the assumption that leaders have a limited amount of personal, social, and organisational resources, thus they must distribute these resources selectively and not interact with all subordinates equally (Mueller & Lee, 2002). A central characteristic is the focus on the quality of the

exchange relationship between a leader and a particular member of a work unit, team, department, or organisation (van Breukelen, Schyns, & Le Blanc, 2006). The subordinate's perceptions of communication in interpersonal and organisational contexts are strongly influenced by the quality of LMX (Mueller & Lee, 2002). High levels of LMX tend to see individuals reporting frequent communication with their supervisors, which provides continuous emotional support as well as formal and informal rewards (Kacmar, Witt, Zivnuska, & Gully, 2003). Although LMX studies do offer insight into communication between leaders and followers, they do so from the point of view of subordinates, not leaders.

Higher quality LMX relationships are more collaborative in nature and have thus been positively related to important leader and subordinate behaviour such as job attitudes and performance (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). Studies applying LMX theory have also determined that employees tend to develop higher quality LMX with a same-sex supervisor than with one of the opposite sex (Wayne, Liden, & Sparrowe, 1994; Varma & Stroh, 2001). Although the LMX literature points to the fact that female managers communicate better with female subordinates, there is a lack of research examining how leaders, in particular females, make sense of this communication experience.

2.7 Sensemaking

The construction of meaning has been studied under various headings, including noticing, interpreting, enacting, and learning, however the most inclusive term, which embraces all the processes that people employ to make their situations accountable to themselves and others, is “sensemaking” (Mills, 2002). Sensemaking is the ongoing process of making experience meaningful (Weick, 1995) and has become a highly influential conceptual lens because it embraces plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality, rather than objective perception (Weick, 1995). It emerged at a time when interpretivism, a paradigm with a subjective ontology, was rising in popularity.

Sensemaking involves circumstances being “turned into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard to action” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). The central questions for a researcher interested in

sensemaking are how, why, and with what effect do people make their world seem sensible and, in doing so, construct their sense of reality (Weick, 1995). This means that sensemaking is a particularly useful concept when seeking to understand organisational phenomena from an organisational member's perspective (Mills, 2010).

For organisational members, unprecedented events tend to instigate very deliberate searches for meaning that involve constructing a story to explain what is going on (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012). This observation is in line with research that suggests that sensemaking is driven by people collaboratively seeking to reduce ambiguity created through communication (Mills, 2002, 2010; Weick, 1995; Hutchins, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Individuals are said to create whatever meaning they can from the social interaction and familiar structures that are presented to them (Weick, 1995) in order to answer the question, "what is going on here?" When data is collected and analysed from a sensemaking perspective, the researcher concentrates on the individuals' perceptions of who they are, and their understandings of the organisational environment and its social processes (Mills, 2009). A sensemaking approach simply brings attention back to peoples' socially situated, constantly evolving, retrospective sense of phenomena, and most importantly, how they create this sense (Mills, 2010). It is strongly associated with research that is interpretive and is used by scholars who want to understand how individuals "appropriate and enact their realities" (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2012, p. 266).

Sensemaking is often studied in organisations when significant change events occur, however the process is still relevant in many other contexts, particularly when issues are of significance to the leaders (Humpherys, Ucbasaran, & Lockett, 2012). Humpherys et al. (2012) go so far as to argue that sensemaking is the key element in the leadership process, as this is where the meaning behind identity and action are materialised. Mills (2003), following Weick (1995), proposes that identity is at the root of the sensemaking process as it iteratively influences an individual's understanding and is created in the process of making situations meaningful.

In a widely cited contribution, Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) advocate for the importance of identity in sensemaking, claiming that identity shapes how we interpret and enact situations, thus ensuring identity, meaning, and action are coupled. Studies

of women in the workplace have shown them to form identities that they then use to construct meaning towards subjects (Buzzanell, et al., 2005; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). This suggests identities are not constant, as people renegotiate their identities throughout their experiences (Adikaram, 2018). Studies show that women also tend to create narratives, which are informed by their unique experiences, but may have similar themes to those of their female colleagues (Bute & Jensen, 2011), suggesting a gender effect or predisposition for convergent sensemaking. Similarly the literature suggests that women use both individualist and collectivist sensemaking frames to make sense of their experiences, depending on the topic of conversation (Hamel, 2009).

Literature over the years contains many studies of workplace sensemaking (Mills 2002), but few focus specifically on making sense of communication. New Zealand studies looking at sensemaking about communication have focused on workers' sensemaking in a factory setting (Mills, 2002) and studies of communication during a change of CEO (Mills, 2009). A recent overseas study looked at the how sensemaking during a crisis was affected by social media communication (Stieglitz et al., 2017). Overall, there are very few studies on female sensemaking and communication. One study completed by Buzzanell, et al. (2005), looked at the sense female managers' make of their experiences on returning to work after maternity leave. Hamel (2009) also looked at females in the workplace, in a study of the sense they make of career barriers. Other studies of female sensemaking tend to be outside the organisation and on topics not related to communication (e.g., Bute & Jensen, 2011; Siino & Hinds, 2005; Lee, Talyor, & Raitt, 2011).

Mills (2002) states that the way people make sense of experiences has been overlooked in the communication literature, with more focus being put on problem solving. Adopting a sensemaking perspective for the current research not only allows female CEO's leadership experiences to be understood from their point of view, but will also help fill the gap in communication literature by revealing how female CEOs' make sense of their communication experiences in the workplace.

2.7.1 Gender and Sensemaking

Although there is a scant literature on the sensemaking of female leaders in workplaces, scholars have explored the influence of gender on sensemaking. In her study of sensemaking as a gendered phenomenon, Foldy (2003) argues that common and predictable gender ‘schemas’, act as a hypothesis for behavior traits and preferences of both men and women. She states that it is gendered assumptions around effective leadership behavior that continue to affect women’s entry into top positions. A study on robots, gender and sensemaking (Siino & Hinds, 2005) reveals that sex segregation in jobs puts men and women in structures and environments that are quite different from each other, which in turn affects the sense individuals make of what is happening to them. The idea that sensemaking is affected by context and situations was also discussed by Mills and Mills (2002). They propose that gender structures and practices in organisations, as well as past experiences of gender roles, influence an individual’s sensemaking.

With gender structure and gender assumptions considered to be significant influences on sense-making, studying female CEOs in different sex-mix organisations has the potential to offer a greater insight into the effect of gender in the workplace and the experiences of women in top leadership.

2.8 Discussion and Conclusion

This review chapter has examined the literature at the intersections of organisational communication, female leadership, and sensemaking, showing that there is a gap in the literature about how females, especially female CEOs, make sense of their communication experiences. The literature suggests that communication is of great importance to organisations, with some scholars proposing that the organisation and communication cannot be separated because they constitute each other (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012; Cooren. Kuhen, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). The Communication Constitutes Organisations (CCO) perspective has gained considerable attention over the past couple of decades and highlights the need to study communication in organisational settings in order to understand the process of organising and its leadership. The literature also indicates that communication is the principal means that leaders use to achieve goals (Elving, 2005; De Ridder, 2004).

Leaders also play a significant role in setting the tone of communication throughout the organisation (Men, 2015). Although there is a vast amount of literature on leadership communication, the female CEO's communication has been overlooked. The fact that women are in the minority in senior leadership positions means that studies that do look at executive positions inevitably tend to be about men (Agle, Mitchell & Sonnenfeld, 1999; Rosser, 2005; Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Guldenburg, 2013).

When leadership was first studied organisations were predominantly male (Parker, 2001). In these early years, effective leadership was associated with masculine attributes. Research has since emerged suggesting that certain behaviours associated with females are now in demand in the 21st century workplace (Noland, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016; Fletcher, 2004). Although studies have shown that the abilities of women predispose them to be successful leaders (Due-Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Druskat, 1994), literature surrounding female leadership tends to focus on coping and resisting strategies for women in workplaces (Oakley, 2000). The literature suggests that the stereotypes surrounding male and female leadership are based on gender not sex (Due-Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Although sex and gender are often used interchangeably, the two have different meanings. Gender exaggerates the effect of biological differences, highlighting the role of socially constructed expectations. Gender stereotypes are then self-fulfilling as they impact on how individuals believe men and women should behave in certain situations and environments.

The chapter also reinforces the fact that females are underrepresented in executive positions, especially in male dominated industries, and, although there is a lot of discussion about why this is, there tends to be little focus on the women who do break the glass ceiling. The review specifically highlights the need to focus on female leaders and to seek to understand their leadership experience, especially in relation to their communication with subordinates.

It is evident that there is an opportunity to address this gap in literature on female CEO sensemaking about leadership communication experiences. Given that the impact of male and female gender on communication is a highly debated subject, there is also an opportunity to explore how the male/female mix in an organisation impacts on the sense

female CEOs make of their communication experiences. The study is guided by the following research questions which emerged from this opportunity:

1. How do female executives experience and make sense of their communication experiences in predominantly male organisations?
2. Do these experiences differ from female executives leading predominantly female, or mixed-sex organisations?

The following chapter addresses the research design used to answer the above research questions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Given the paucity of research examining female CEOs' communication experiences in different organisations, an exploratory and inductive approach to theory building is appropriate (Tracy, 2010). This chapter begins by discussing the ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological assumptions that underpin the study. The justification for the choice of a qualitative research design is provided, before moving on to describe and discuss how this research design was implemented. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the criteria used to evaluate the research quality and limitations.

3.2 Philosophical Considerations: Choosing a research paradigm

Consideration of the philosophy of science ensures the choice of research paradigm is aligned with the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). In order to select an appropriate philosophical perspective, the researcher must make several fundamental assumptions regarding two dimensions: the nature of society and the nature of science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Maxwell, 2012). Deciding on a methodology involves first choosing a philosophical approach that assumes a subjective ontology, where reality is assumed to be a matter of perception and socially constructed, or an objective ontology that assumes there is an objective world of facts that exists independent of perception. Objectivism and subjectivism sit on opposite ends of an ontological continuum, with various positions in-between (Holden & Lynch, 2004). The choice of ontology then dictates one's epistemological stance in terms of what constitutes knowledge, what is the role of the researcher in seeking to create knowledge, and whether human nature is pre-determined or not (Holden & Lynch, 2004). The other assumption surrounding human nature is whether the researcher views humans as the controller or controlled. A research paradigm also includes axiological and methodological assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Axiology is concerned with the values, ethics and moral conduct of the researcher and how this influences the research process (Carter & Little, 2007). Lastly the methodology is the researcher's means of conducting an investigation. Certain

methodologies lend themselves to certain research paradigms and logically align with the assumptions already made (Holden & Lynch, 2004).

Ontology is concerned with the nature of world – what it consists of, what entities operate within it and how they interrelate with each other (Bahari, 2010). This means that ontological assumptions are concerned with whether the nature of reality can be based on true existence, or whether what is considered ‘reality’ is merely determined by an individual’s own mind (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The researcher must decide in relation to the two main schools of thought (Gray, 2013). Positivism, which sits at one end of the continuum, states that there are social facts with an objective reality independent of the beliefs of an individual (Bahari, 2010). Relativism, the opposing belief, assumes that reality is unique to the individual who perceives it, thus one individual’s reality may differ from another’s; there are multiple realities and also multiple ways of accessing them (Gray, 2013). Burrell & Morgan (1979) state that the distinction between the two positions is important in research because an individual’s view of reality will have an impact on their actions as well as their answers. An interpretive paradigm embraces a relativist ontology as it welcomes the idea that multiple realities exist, and these are waiting to be identified by the researcher (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). It assumes that knowledge of reality is a social construction (Walsham, 1995) (i.e., a social constructionist epistemology). The researcher uses his or her own socially constructed preconceptions to guide the project and interact with participants, in order to tap into and understand their subjective understandings of their experience. This is why the interpretivist researchers believe that value-free data is unable to be obtained (Walsham, 1995). Truth cannot be discovered, but instead arrives from our engagement with the realities of the world (Crotty, 1998). Reality is thus a ‘construction’ of society and highlights that there is no single absolute truth (Rohleder & Lyons 2014). Reality thus resides in the process in which it is created, and knowledge must be gained through understanding that process (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Individuals can construct the meaning of the same phenomenon in multiple different ways, which means that contradictory, but equally valid, interpretations of the world can exist (Gray, 2013).

Since the researcher’s view of reality is the cornerstone for all other assumptions, one’s ontological position inform the assumptions regarding epistemology (Holden & Lynch,

2004). Ontology and epistemology are inevitably intertwined, thus it is difficult to discuss one without sliding into the other and vice versa (Rohleder & Lyons 2014). Bahari (2010) states that epistemology is a theory of knowledge and is concerned with what is considered acceptable knowledge in particular disciplines. As one moves along the subjective-objective continuum, the assumptions change and so what is understood to constitute knowledge changes (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Each epistemological assumption entails ideas about what form of knowledge can be obtained and also what constitutes knowledge (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Although scholars have discussed variations of epistemological stances, Crotty (1998) states that at least three different epistemologies have emerged; objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism, all of which have different theoretical foundations. Objectivism and subjectivism sit at each end of the continuum, with constructionism positioned between these two extremes. In terms of axiology, researchers who lean more towards a relativist ontology and epistemology, acknowledge that the research process is influenced by the value systems and cultural norms of the researcher, as well as those of the research participants (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the researcher accepts that she brings her values to the research process and recognises the need to acknowledge personal values and biases.

The researcher started from the standpoint that there are multiple social realities and people attach their own meaning to their experience of these realities (i.e., a subjective ontology). Thus, the present study adopts an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism and constructivism are closely related paradigms, sharing the goal of understanding the multifaceted and interconnected world from the point of view of those who live in it (Schwandt, 1994). Although there are some epistemological and ontological differences between interpretivism and constructivism, they are often minute and not of great concern to the pragmatic researcher. For this reason, “interpretivism” will be used as the umbrella term for the two paradigms.

An interpretive approach was deemed the most suitable for several reasons. First, the researcher strongly believes that an individual’s interpretations of reality, and their constructions of knowledge, are influenced by the culture and society they were raised in and belong to (Crotty, 1998). Second, the researcher agrees with Denzin and Lincoln (2011) that all research is, in one way or another, influenced by the researcher’s beliefs, values and feelings about the world, and thus all research has elements of interpretation.

Third, the ontology at the heart of the interpretive paradigm fits perfectly with the phenomenon being studied – CEOs’ sense of their experience of leadership communication. In order to understand how one experiences a phenomenon one must adopt a participant-centric approach to the study. If one accepts there is no one way of understanding the world of CEO communication, then a subjective ontology is warranted.

The choice of methodology logically follows the assumptions the researcher has already made about ontology and epistemology, including the role of the researcher (Holden & Lynch, 2004). Interpretivist studies most often employ qualitative research methods (Goldkuhl, 2012). This type of research enables the researcher to collect data that provides insight into the participant’s experiences. Qualitative research methods seek to understand the qualities of phenomena, rather than quantifying aspects of the phenomena in order to employ statistical tests. This means qualitative methods are ideal for tapping into respondents’ ideas and understandings about their own experiences. Overall a general inductive qualitative methodology was adopted, utilizing in-depth interviewing with thematic analysis as the key means of data analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Selection Criteria

To ensure that other researchers who use the same procedure can obtain similar results, it is important that the criteria that guide decisions are made explicit (Merken, 2004). This study required that participants were in a CEO role, or had been within the last two years. In order for the research question to be answered it was important to study three types of leadership situation: females leading predominantly female organisations, females leading predominantly male organisations, and females leading mixed-sex organisations. To allow balanced comparisons it was deemed preferable to gain equal samples from each situation. It should be noted that choices of organisations were constrained, as there are relatively few females in CEO positions in New Zealand, with only one female CEO leading a New Zealand top 50 company (Theunissen, 2017). In addition to the type of organisation they led, the female CEOs were selected according to their experience, background and accessibility.

The three types of organisations were defined in the following way:

1. Predominantly male (PM) – the majority of employees in the organisation are male but a female holds a top leadership position.
2. Predominantly female (PF) – the majority of employees in the organisation are female and a female also holds a top leadership position.
3. Mixed sex (MS) – females and males are represented evenly in the organisation, but a female holds a top leadership position.

A sample of female CEOs who fitted into each category was created and from the limited pools for each category and according to the CEOs' availability during the study's timeframe. Four females in each category were kind enough to participate.

3.3.2 Sample Recruitment

To ensure that the sample of participants fitted with the criteria discussed above, multiple recruitment methods were employed. The first CEOs recruited were identified by the researcher's personal contacts, who provided email addresses for potential participants. These CEOs were sent an email with an attached Information Sheet (Appendix 1) explaining the project and asking if they wanted to be involved. A second group was identified through media reports about female leaders and selected based on their experience or backgrounds in leadership. This group was also sent an email outlining important details of the study. If email addresses were not found, participants were contacted through LinkedIn or through their companies' websites. The final group was recruited through recommendations of CEOs who had already participated in the study. This method is known as snowballing or chain referral sampling, and occurs when people make referrals of others who may possess the appropriate characteristics (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). These three methods produced 12 female CEOs who agreed to participate. Due to the limited number of female CEOs in New Zealand, the difficulty of recruiting people of such seniority in the specific timeframe, and the exploratory nature of the research, 12 participants was considered a satisfactory result.

The CEOs represented various sectors and encompassed a variety of ages. Before any interview was conducted all participants were asked to read and sign a consent form that ensured the confidentiality. To satisfy this requirement, any names or places in the following chapters have been changed to pseudonyms. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants in this study.

Table 1: Summary of Participants

CEO pseudonym	Size of Organisation	Sector	Sex-mix
Marie	Small	Sport	Predominantly Male
Kate	Small	Non-profit	Predominantly Female
Lisa	Small	Sport	Mixed Sex
Sally	Medium	Local Government	Mixed Sex
Hannah	Small	Agriculture	Predominantly Male
Judy	Medium	Data/Tech	Predominantly Female
Liz	Medium	Non-profit	Predominantly Female
Jane	Medium	Accounting	Predominantly Male
Mary	Large	Local Government	Mixed Sex
Stephanie	Small	Sport	Predominantly Female
Jill	Small & Large	Sport & Banking	Sport: Predominantly Female Banking: Predominantly Male
Annie	Medium	Local Government	Mixed Sex

3.3.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Hopf (2004) highlights the advantages of using semi-structured interviews for qualitative research, stating that this method gives the researcher the opportunity to enquire openly about situational meaning or motive. Semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate for this study because its purpose was to determine the participants' interpretations of their leadership communication experiences (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are also said to be useful when the researcher wants to explore the respondent's perceptions and opinions of complex or sensitive topics, as the method allows probing and clarification of answers (Barriball & While, 1994).

Semi-structured interviews are often guided by a set of topics the researcher wishes to explore. They can have a fixed set of questions for use as a guide, but additional questions may be included to explore issues that emerge in further detail (Cachia & Millward, 2011). This gives the researcher flexibility to respond to the direction taken by the participant on a particular topic and to ask follow-up questions to gain insight into their responses. Such insights may not be discovered in a structured interview. In order to gain as much useful information as possible, the researcher must put the interviewee at ease and establish a rapport, but still maintain control of the discussion (Cachia & Millward, 2011). Appendix 3 shows the interview guide used for this study. It begins with a general open-ended question on the participant's journey to becoming a CEO, before moving into more specific questions on sex/gender and communication.

Interviews were conducted once both parties had decided on a suitable time. For the interviewee's convenience, the researcher travelled to each participant's place of work, apart from one CEO who was met in an office at the University. The meetings began with the signing of a Consent Form (Appendix 2) and the researcher asking permission to record the interview. In order to enable transcription and accuracy of data, all interviewees were recorded using the researcher's personal device. The interviews ranged from 32 minutes to one hour and were used to discover opinions and experiences regarding communication as a CEO with male and female subordinates. Since the sex mix of an organisation is an important factor in the research question, Table 1 above provides an overview of the sex-mix in each participant's organisation.

3.4 Transcription

Transcription allows for the fine analysis of language (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Transcriptions are useful for scientific analysis because they allow fleeting conversational behaviour to be permanently available in writing (Kowal & O'Connell, 2004). In addition to spoken words, scholars have debated the extent to which emotional aspects and non-verbal cues should be incorporated (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). This research adopts the approach of Kowal and O'Connell (2004), which states that transcripts should accurately represent, as much as possible, the strings of words said (verbal features), but also the acoustic form (e.g., pitch) and any nonverbal behaviour such as laughing and gestures. To ensure complete privacy, the researcher did her own transcription. Transcripts ranging from 10 to 18 pages were sent to participants for verification before data analysis began. The majority of the participants were happy with the transcripts, with only one CEO asking that a specific comment be removed prior to the data analysis phase.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis:

As mentioned previously, a general inductive qualitative methodology was used in this study. The chosen method for the research was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the method of “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insights into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2019, pg. 57). Themes are coded into categories according to their relationship to the research question. This gives the researcher rich details because the process simultaneously organises and describes the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At minimum, thematic analysis describes and organizes observations, but more commonly it is used to interpret aspects of a phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998).

In this study, thematic analysis allowed the researcher to gather insights into the ideational content of the participants' sensemaking accounts, as it required searching for themes that were relevant to the phenomenon under consideration (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997) – in this case, the experience of leader-member communication from the leaders' perspectives. A theme in this context means a specific pattern of meaning found in the data and can refer to either manifest or latent content (Joffe,

2012). Braun and Clarke (2006) state that because thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows data to be focused on in numerous ways, researchers have the choice of reporting the obvious meanings in the data, or the assumptions and ideas that lay behind what is openly stated. Thematic analysis is also flexible because it looks for unique patterns in the content of language, which means it does not need to adhere to any particular theoretical perspective of language, or other pre-emptive frameworks, to explain human behaviour (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Although the method is known for its flexibility, it is important to note that detailed coding criteria still need to be specified (Joffe, 2012). Strategic decisions need to be made regarding what can and cannot be coded as a theme, whether to use inductive or theoretical analysis and an assessment of the fit of ontological and epistemological assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes identified in a thematic analysis are strongly linked to the original data in an inductive way, whereas theoretical analysis tends to be driven more explicitly by analytical interest in the area (Braun & Clarke, 2013), thus the process is more deductive. As discussed previously, there is also a decision to be made regarding the level to which themes are analysed as semantic (manifest) or latent (Joffe, 2012). With semantic analysis the researcher is not looking beyond what the participant has said and instead focuses primarily on the surface meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In contrast, latent analysis identifies the meaning beneath the surface of the data, going beyond the participants' meaning to provide an interpretation of the meaning apparently embodied in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (e.g., apparent through the use of imagery). This latent level of analysis tends to be in line with the epistemological assumptions of this research, thus thematic analysis was judged to be the best method for analysing the data collected. The flexibility and adaptability of the approach also informed the decision to select this particular method.

Following the guidelines set by Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019), the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading transcripts several times, then began coding by generating initial codes. Chapter four includes quotations of varying lengths, which were taken from the interview transcripts at this stage. Initial coding produced 21 items of varying strength and importance, but following further

analysis, these were combined or removed to conclude with 11 themes. These 11 themes were then coded and bundled into higher-level categories. Three categories emerged that could be used to answer the research question and determine how CEOs in different mixed-sex organisations made sense of their communication experiences. The themes found in these three categories were then discussed in detail, with relevant quotes being used to supplement the data.

3.6 Evaluating Research Quality

Although there is much debate concerning what defines quality of findings, there is a consensus among scholars that having ‘high quality’ data must be a priority for researchers. Morse, Barrett, Mayan, and Spiers (2002) talk about quality of data in terms of rigour and state that, compared to quantitative research which provides data that is far more conclusively quantifiable, evaluating qualitative data is less straightforward. In order for the data collected in this research to be evaluated in an appropriate manner, Guba and Lincoln’s (1981, 1982, 1985) concept of ‘trustworthiness’ has been adopted. Trustworthiness replaces the traditional concepts of reliability and validity and instead contains four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, each of which contains a detailed methodological strategy for validating qualitative rigor (Morse et al., 2008). These four aspects are outlined by Shenton (2004), who states that credibility occurs when, (1) the research measures what it is actually intended too, (2) transferability is evident when the reader can decide whether the prevailing environment is similar to another familiar situation or other settings because the researcher has provided significant details of the context of the fieldwork, (3) dependability is difficult in qualitative research but is based on the researchers’ contributing descriptions of what they did, so that the study may be repeated in future by themselves or others, and finally, (4) confirmability is achieved when the researcher demonstrates that findings from the research have arisen from the data analyses, not from merely confirming the researcher’s prejudgements. Each of these key aspects are discussed in further detail in the following segments.

3.6.1 Credibility

To ensure that readers feel confident in using the findings to make decisions, a study must be credible (Tracy, 2010). In qualitative research, credibility measures ‘how vivid and faithful the description of the phenomenon’ is (Beck, 1993, p. 264). For the qualitative research to be deemed credible, participants and readers with similar experiences should be able to recognise the experiences described in the research (Beck, 1993). When conducting semi-structured interviews, credibility does not depend on the same wording being used each time a question is asked but is reliant on ensuring that the same meaning is conveyed to participants across interviews (Hardie, Shilbury, Ware & Bozzie, 2010). In this study, the researcher was diligent in ensuring that questions had the same meaning even if they were not presented ‘word for word.’ The astuteness of participants in the study also ensured that high-quality data was collected. This was important as high-quality data is considered an important factor in ensuring credibility (Patton, 1999). Finally, the researcher took notes of non-verbal cues and subjective states during interviews and provided the readers with rich excerpts from the transcript (Beck, 1993). These steps helped to further ensure, that credibility was assured.

3.6.2 Transferability

Transferability is possible when findings are seen to fit into contexts outside of the study situation (Krefting, 1991). Assessment of transferability is often left to the readers, who must decide if the study is similar enough to be transferable to their own context (Kuper, Lingard & Levinson, 2008). Providing the researcher has presented adequate data to allow comparison, they have addressed the problem of transferability. To ensure that readers may relate findings to their own experiences, or to other research findings, detailed descriptions of the participants are presented in this study. Since transferability, at its root, is concerned with the degree to which constructs are meaningful to others, the context of this study is described in as much detail possible (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Although there are natural limitations to how this research can be transferred, all possible steps were taken to ensure the highest chances of transferability.

3.6.3 Dependability

Dependability relies on the researcher's ability to reduce idiosyncrasies in interpretation (Baxter and Eyles, 1997) and relates directly to the consistency of findings (Krefting, 1991). Poorly defined analytical constructs, and premature closure of the analysis, are two possible threats to dependability (Baxter and Eyles, 1997). Some concepts are known to have numerous definitions, thus when constructs are not clearly defined, both the researcher and those being researched may have different interpretations (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). The other threat occurs when analytical constructs are finalised before the available data warrants it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The production of a research plan that was flexible when needed, and the documenting of any changes, were two strategies used to increase dependability (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest that an audit of research is one way in which the dependability of data can be enhanced. An 'inquiry audit' occurs when the reviewer examines the consistency of both the process and the product of research (Krefting, 1991). To a certain extent the senior research supervisor played the role of auditor in this study, thus an auditee-auditor research relationship contributed towards ensuring appropriate interpretation and research dependability. The researcher also documented her research plan and any changes made throughout, to ensure dependability was achieved. She also thoroughly checked the process to make sure it was aligned with the paradigm and that coding was consistent throughout.

3.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability occurs in research once credibility, transferability, and dependability have been achieved (Thomas & Maglivi, 2011). The axiology of an interpretivist approach assumes that the researcher's values are inextricably embedded in the research. Rather than trying to eliminate researcher bias altogether, the challenge for researchers is to be aware of how their values and biases shape the outcomes of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researcher bias is often inevitable, especially when you consider that it is people who design tests and questionnaires (Shenton, 2004), but in an interpretive study subjectivity is a given.

Qualitative researchers tend to accept that their interests and motivations may affect interpretations (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). For this reason, the researcher kept a reflective diary throughout this study to record information about the interviews and the interpretations made (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To thoroughly achieve confirmability, the researcher ensured that any interpretation was grounded in her academic research, not directed by existing literature.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are present in any kind of research and it is important that the researcher considers them in order to prevent any harm, specifically to the participants involved (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Before any research took place, the research design was examined and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (Appendix 4). As mentioned previously, participants were given an information sheet (Appendix 1) outlining any important or necessary information. They were also presented with a consent form and asked to sign this before interviewing took place. The consent form provided details about the security and privacy of the data and the interviewee's rights. The researcher also asked for verbal permission to record the interview to confirm that the participant still agreed to this. Once the data had been transcribed, participants were sent a copy and asked if they wanted anything removed or added. Edits were carried out as per their requests. Participants were also given the opportunity to remove their data from the study at any time and were informed that the final research would be publicly available. To ensure confidentiality, real names were changed to pseudonyms and all data was stored on a password-protected computer.

3.8 Summary

This chapter set out to provide a comprehensive description of the qualitative research methodology utilised in order to answer the questions that emerged in Chapter Two. The chapter explained the interpretive paradigm that informed this research. It began by discussing the relevant philosophical considerations, including the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions. Next, the research design was presented, including an explanation of the selection criteria and recruitment of participants. Following this, the use of semi-structured interviews for data collection

was reviewed, before highlighting that the data was transcribed for analysis purposes. Thematic analysis, including a comparative analysis between organisational types, was then presented as the choice for data analysis. The chapter concluded with an evaluation of the research quality and limitations, and an explanation of how ethical considerations relating to the research were approached. The following chapter will explore the findings that emerged from the data analysis.

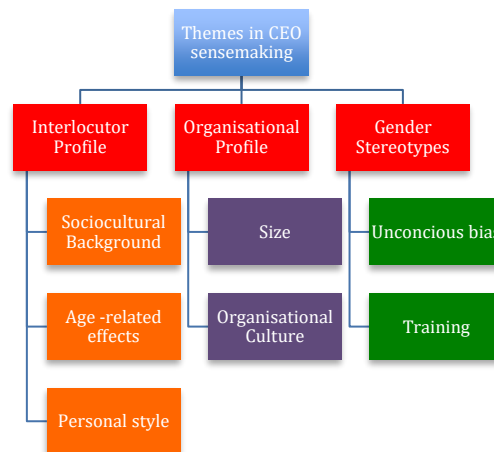
Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings from the thematic analysis of twelve semi-structured interviews conducted in order to answer the two research questions introduced in Chapter One. The thematic coding produced three categories of themes (higher order codes) that were found to shape participants' sensemaking: (1) Interlocutor Profile (2) Organisational Profile and (3) Gender Stereotypes (See Figure 4.1.1). These themes capture how the CEOs made sense of their communication experiences in the interview process. Excerpts from participating CEOs' interviews are provided, to illustrate how these themes were woven into the participants' sensemaking.

The chapter begins by defining what is meant by "interlocutor", then discussing in detail the themes in the first category, "Interlocutor Profile", which are sociocultural background, age-related effects and personal style. These are explored in relation to how the CEOs referred to them to make sense of their communication experiences. Next, the themes in the category "Organisational Profile", size and culture, are discussed. Finally the third category, "Gender Stereotypes" is discussed. This also has two themes: the influence of unconscious bias on thinking, and the positive effects of training on self-awareness. The chapter concludes with a comparison of how these themes feature in the way CEOs in the three different gender-mix organisations make sense of their experiences. Figure 4.1 visually depicts the themes in CEO sensemaking.

Figure. 4.1: Themes in the Female CEOs' Sensemaking



4.2 Category 1 - Interlocutor Profile

An interlocutor is an individual or party in an interpersonal exchange, such as a dialogue or conversation. The root of the word is from the Latin *interloqui*, which, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means "to speak between" or "to issue an interlocutory decree." Female executives revealed a strong predisposition to index their sensemaking accounts of communication with subordinates to the interlocutors' personal profiles. In some cases, the profile of the subordinate was considered most influential in explaining their experiences, while at other times the CEOs referred to their own profile in order to make sense of communication. Across all interview transcripts the analysis confirmed that three main factors in an interlocutor's profile were considered salient when making sense of leader-member communication. These factors were coded as:

1. Sociocultural Background
2. Age Related Effects
3. Personal Style

4.2.1 Sociocultural Background

The female executives (CEOs) in this study incorporated a range of sociocultural factors into their accounts of their leadership communication experiences. CEOs from all three types of organisation spoke about situations in which they felt that their communication had been influenced by their employee's background and cultural

upbringing. Interestingly, the CEOs' own background and culture, and the effects this had on communication, was not greatly talked about. In the following excerpts, PM signifies a predominantly male organisation, PF a predominantly female organisation and MS a mixed-sex organisation. In these examples, the CEOs attribute the way people communicate to background, rather than sex or gender. Even in the first excerpt, where the CEO acknowledges that sex does have an effect on leader-member communication, she shows reluctance to attribute her experiences to sex alone, but incorporates race as a modifier of any effect caused by being a woman.

"So the way you communicate isn't just because you're a woman, it's because you're a white woman. You've been brought up.... you know, in a particular cultural background, which would potentially impact on how you communicate [with staff]." – **Marie PM**

"The same as we can learn voice and strength and having our opinion. It's [leaders communication] more to do with how you're raised than it is to do with anything." – **Kate PF**

"...but that makes a big difference when you've got a group of people that come from a very similar place and approach people in a very similar way. So I don't really have this massive diversity around how people communicate with each other because we are kind of quite aligned." – **Lisa MS**

The third interview excerpt (above) not only illustrates how background was woven into sensemaking accounts, but specifically how this CEO attributed the ease she experienced communicating with her subordinates to the fact there was a homogeneity of background across the organisation which aligned with her own background.

While talking about upbringing, the impact parents have on their child's communication style featured in the sensemaking accounts. Sally specifically raised the nature versus nurture debate, asserting that she believes it is the environment in which someone is raised that influences his or her ability to communicate. She and other CEOs (Kate, Hannah and Judy) proposed that upbringing was not just important for making sense of communication with current employees, but also important when raising the

next generation. The CEOs' sense was that how children are raised to communicate will have a significant impact on leader-member communication now, in future workplaces and in society at large. The following interview excerpts capture the way upbringing was used to make sense of communication. What is particularly interesting is the way each CEO personalises their sensemaking. They connect with their experiences, for example, talking about "we are who we are", "because I have a boy and a girl", "my amazing friends" and "my family". In doing so they incorporate into their sensemaking other identities such as parents, family members, and friends.

"There is nature and nurture in a way you know, so we kind of come out, we are who we are, but I think, um, peoples' ability or their communication style, um, can be influenced by the environment that they're in." - **Sally MS**

"...we need to raise incredible men and I know there's a big focus on raising really strong, independent, feisty woman and that's great because I've got a boy and a girl. But if I raise my daughter who's seven to be feisty and I don't raise [my son] to be respectful and understanding that he and [his sister] are identical, then he's going to be hopeless." - **Kate PF**

"You have to start from when kids are like tiny to actually teach them. Because it's wired in their brains to think differently." - **Hannah PM**

"I think it depends on the environments that people are growing up in and so all my amazing friends, um, and their children are just growing up in an environment where the daughters are just like, I can do anything in the world. And so for them it's really different. But, when I think of my family in the Central Hawkes Bay, they aren't, um, online, very much they are quite a rural kind of community and it's not changed." - **Judy PF**

What is significant here is that these CEOs were not simply indexing their sense of how communication is experienced to interlocutors' backgrounds. They are weaving their personal circumstances into their sensemaking accounts and revealing a degree of

personal connectivity or identification that suggests sensemaking for these women could not be separated from their life story and the relationships in them.

Interestingly, it was only Kate who talked about her own upbringing and the impact this had on her communication. Where the other CEOs tended to look at the behaviour of others in their networks in order to make sense of their experiences, Kate identified characteristics in herself that she attributed to her upbringing. She also made it clear that she believes upbringing, and how individuals are raised, has a greater impact on communication than sex or gender does. Other CEOs in the study considered training and self-awareness to be more salient influences on their ability to communicate with employees. These themes will be discussed later in terms of the influence of gender stereotyping and unconscious bias on the CEOs' sensemaking about leader-member communication. Below are two examples of how Kate wove her own upbringing into a sensemaking account.

"I think it's shaped by the fact that I'm a driver because if I was amiable I wouldn't be as grumpy, you know get feisty and stuck in and want to do things. I think it's definitely my social profiling and that comes from neuropathways and that comes from how I was raised. I was raised to have a big mouth." **Kate PF**

"I don't think it's a female thing. Again, I think it comes down to an innate way in which you were raised." **Kate PF**

Culture and ethnicity were also themes used to account for differences in communication. While these terms are not equivalent, the data on both have been grouped together, as they were used interchangeably by the CEOs. The CEOs used past or current employees, whose cultural backgrounds differed from their own or that of others in the workplace, to make sense of their communication experiences. It is interesting to note that Liz had not incorporated the impact of cultural difference into her responses until she was asked about a difference in communication after six men had left the organisation. It was only after being probed by the interviewer to make sense of this experience that she concluded that cultural differences were evident in how she accounted for communication with subordinates, and in fact felt this factor had greater salience in her sensemaking than gender (her word).

Jane talks about both ethnicity and upbringing together, suggesting that in her mind the two are interconnected and that a person's culture (e.g., religion) will influence their upbringing, and thus the way they communicate later in life. However, none of the CEOs involved in the study talked about their own culture and the impact this had on their experiences. The CEOs instead used the behaviour and characteristics of others to make sense of the cultural impact on communication. This is interesting as it could be interpreted to mean that the CEOs consider their own culture is the norm from which others deviate.

“Samoans and Tongans have quite different communication, things around eye contact, around where you are seated, are you seated high or low, you know, so different cultural backgrounds will also influence how people communicate.”

- Marie PM

“So I had an Indian guy reporting to me and so there were certain things that I came to understand were because of his culture..., so sometimes I would think is it his personality type, is it his gender, is it his culture? And then there's all three influencing on how he's communicating with me or sometimes not communicating with me.” - Sally MS

“I think there are cultural differences as well. So we've had Pacific men, we've had Maori men and I think, I've never thought about this, so this is really interesting. I think there were more issues that were cultural, than were gender based actually when I think about it, although I hadn't thought about it until this moment.” - Liz PF

“Well I guess it really depends on the upbringing, what they're used to. I mean, we've had some ethnic groups who wouldn't want to talk about anything. They'd rather be sent an email with their feedback rather than have a conversation about it.” - Jane PM

The analysis revealed a strong tendency for the CEOs to use sociocultural factors such as upbringing and ethnicity to make sense of their communication experiences. Interestingly, the CEOs were inclined to refer to the characteristics of other people,

rather than their own characteristics, to support their conclusions about how culture or upbringing influence leader-member communication. This could be interpreted as a less intimate option and a desire to have a little bit of personal distance in the interview. When the findings for each CEO in the study were compared, this analysis revealed that the sex-mix of a CEO's organisation did not explain the use of sociocultural factors in the CEO's sensemaking. All three groups of CEOs attributed differences in how they experienced leader-member communication to how the employee was raised, or to their culture. This suggests that the male-female mix in an organisation's workforce was experienced as less significant, when accounting for the variations in leader-member communication patterns that arise, when there is cultural diversity within the workplace.

4.2.2 Age-related Effects

A selection of CEOs indicated that age had an impact on their past and present communication experiences. While talking about their younger employees, the CEOs identified generational differences, which they believed affected how they experienced communication. Experienced CEOs commented on the greater confidence that their younger employees had, compared to other age groups. This was not to say that the younger workers were disrespectful, but that they were perceived to be more informal in their communication than older generations, or young people in the past. The youngest CEO interviewed (Jane) also spoke about the generational effect in terms of the demands for feedback and information sharing. She considers that the younger generation of employees are not satisfied with just an answer, but want to know the reasoning and logic behind the decisions that leaders are making.

"We've got some people in the older age group who've probably learnt more about the hierarchical, you know, respect your seniors, respect your manager and you know, communicate accordingly. Um, maybe different to, you know, the kinda new generation. I'm not saying that they're disrespectful, but probably more confident and more able to express themselves and also expect to be communicated with in a slightly different way and like to be able to access information immediately." - Sally MS

"I think they are far more informal, you know, like sending an email

going, hey, instead of, you know, hi, or good morning.... it's sort of like there is a little bit of different expectations around those sorts of things, you know?" - Marie PM

"I think probably the younger generation are keener for feedback than the older generation was. I think the older generation are sort of, you know, we do it this way and sometimes there's not a lot of explanation behind it, but you know the millennials, they want to know why we're doing things. And they, you know, they want the reasons behind things, which is understandable." - Jane PM

During the interview process it was noted that it tended to be the CEOs of mixed-sex or male-dominated organisations who referred to age-related effects within their sensemaking accounts. These CEOs focused on the differences in their communication with either older or younger males, but did not seem to identify any significant communication patterns that could be attributed to females of different ages. Their sensemaking accounts suggested that they believed younger males are more willing and able to communicate, especially with female leaders.

"....I find that I can be much more myself with those young men then I can with the older ones because they just don't even see me as a woman they just see me as mom." - Hannah PM

"The head of water is a really lovely young guy who um, who will often pop in and just say, Hey, can I just have a bit of support?" - Mary MS

CEOs leading predominately female organisations also discussed the age-related effects in relation to younger and older men, but their observations and experiences were not in their workplace, but on boards. Liz talked about the difficulties that may occur when a young woman works with older men, and the misconceptions around what this relationship should look like. Interestingly, this CEO attributes the difficulties that may occur in the relationship to the older man, not to the younger woman. This is in line with the sense that age impacts on the way males communicate, but not on the way females do. Stephanie's perceptions of younger males on boards also aligned with the views of younger males in the workplace, as her chairman was open to receiving help, much like younger male employees. Older women on boards were not mentioned

by the CEOs during the interviews, again suggesting that age has a greater effect in male dominated areas or they had not experience of older women on boards.

“I think if you're working as a youngish woman with older men, they might treat you a bit like you're their daughter or their secretary and so you have to renegotiate that relationship with them, you know, I'm not your daughter and I'm not your secretary and I'm not your potential date, so let's just get all that sorted out.” - Liz PF

“We've got a young chairman who's younger than me and I actually find he's really fresh... but yeah, he just needs a little bit of help and I'm happy to give it to him.” - Stephanie PF

The analysis suggested that age also impacts on how the CEOs see themselves when they attempt to understand leader-member communication through their employee's eyes. More experienced CEOs perceive themselves as parent figures, having to deal with the communication issues around that relationship. The following interview excerpts capture the way the CEOs' perceptions of their own age impacted on their sensemaking. Hannah referenced herself as a mother figure, which in turn influenced how she believed her staff saw her. Sally was similar in this respect and was aware that although she did not regard her staff as a lot younger, they may think of her as much older and the 'same age as their parents'. Such findings suggest that the CEOs were, in the course of making sense of their experiences in the interview process, discursively creating or confirming their self-identities (Weick. 1995). These identities could in turn influence how they interacted and communicated with their subordinates. In the excerpt below, the CEOs are seen to identify themselves as parental figures, relating to the mothering metaphor that is used in the literature. Even if their subordinates don't see them in this way, the way they see themselves and act as a consequence, is likely to impact on their communication.

“But you know, I'm just really mindful of the fact that I'm probably the same age as their parents. So then I have to be really clear in my own thinking about them, thinking about me. It's probably more about me being aware of them thinking about me being that much older, not me thinking that they are that much younger.” - Sally MS

“I look at the young males that work in my team, who don't report directly to me, I'm like their mum because I'm nearly 50.... it's different. They don't see you as a potential partner or you know what I mean?” – Hannah PM

Jane who, as mentioned previously, was the youngest CEO in the study had a different perception of her age, and as a consequence, voiced concern that her employees see her as an authority figure and leader, rather than as a friend their age. The comparisons between the data from the more experienced CEOs and the younger CEO highlighted that it is not only the ages of the employees, but also their own age that influences some CEOs' sensemaking. One might assume that, as the young CEO matures and gains more experience in the role, her perceptions around her age are likely to change and become more similar to that of Sally and Hannah. Again, her subordinates may not see her in this light, but her sense of herself and her age are clearly impacting on the way she makes sense of her leader-member communication experiences.

“Because I'm younger as well and some of them I would have seen his friends. Um, I've probably had to sit back from it a wee bit because um, yeah. You know, you have Friday night drinks and you don't want to have too many drinks because you might say something that you're not supposed to say just because they were like my friends.” Jane PM

As noted earlier, when making sense of their communication experiences, CEOs attributed differences in male communication and their relationships with the CEO to their subordinate's age. A similar sense was not expressed in relation to communication with females of different generations. It was only when accounting for the communication they experienced with males outside of the organisation that the CEOs of predominantly female organisations proposed similar age-related effects. This suggests that age has a greater influence on the sensemaking of female CEOs in predominately male and mixed sex organisations than in predominantly female organisations. Age was also apparently contributing to identity work (i.e., how the females CEOs saw themselves from the standpoint of their subordinates).

4.2.3 Personal Style

Throughout the interview process, the CEOs indicated that personality type or communication style of an employee had a significant impact on communication, and how both they and employees wanted to be communicated with. Of the three factors that make up the interlocutor profile, personal styles were discussed most frequently and in most detail. CEOs were very aware of different personality types amongst their staff and were able to identify how these variations influenced ways of communicating. The following excerpts show the CEOs reflecting on their past experiences to make sense of communication. These experiences have shaped their view of individuals as having different styles and personality, and the impact these have on communication. Mary talks about managers in her team whose personality influences their willingness to ask for advice. Judy highlights the issues that can arise when employees have different styles of communicating, and Jane and Marie mention how different personalities influence the way individuals want to be communicated with.

“Yeah some people just want to know the bare minimum and then they want to move on and other people want more detail, but that's just their personalities.” - Jane PM

“Oh, it's down to individual personalities, I can think of some of my managers that wouldn't dream of asking for advice because they pretty much know how to do it. It's probably variable, individual personality.” - Mary GD

“We've had some prickly behaviour amongst the team that's come from people having such different styles and it's caused a lot of angst and has, taken a lot of time to resolve.” - Judy PF

“I've got a team of introverts and they love emails. They will hate to pick the phone up but if you have other people that are extroverts, they love phones and meetings and coffees and stuff like that.” - Marie PM

CEOs also indicated that the personality type or communication style of an employee has a greater impact on communication than the gender of the individual. They reflected

on both men and women they had interacted with in the past and concluded that differences in communication were in fact due to personality rather than gender. This reflection helped to make justifiable distinctions between the impacts of gender compared to the influences of different personalities. Judy talks about the types of humour shared between people of the opposite sex in her organisation, while Sally, Jill and Annie confirm that although people may communicate differently or have different styles, this is not based on gender. With Jill having worked in a predominantly male organisation during her time in banking, but now being a CEO in a female dominated sector, she could draw on her experiences in both environments and concluded that sex was not influencing personality.

“I can think of like a man and a woman, they are quite like dry humour and blunt and not afraid of calling each other out and they get on really well because that's how they are. Whereas there are others men and women who care more about being upfront nice and making people comfortable before, um, before communicating stuff. And that's not a gender thing when I unpack that.” - Judy PF

“Over my, my kind of career is, it's more personality type driven than it is gender driven. Um, I think that woman can bring good balance to a senior leadership team, just like men can bring good balance to a senior leadership team.” - Sally GD

“I think there are patterns in the way individuals, you know think, and I think there are patterns in the way individuals do react and respond and treat things. Um, but I'm just not seeing it as being a male versus female thing.” - Jill PF

“So I think communication is a really interesting thing, but I don't necessarily think it's about gender so much as it's about personality type.” - Annie GD

The CEOs also used their own self-ascribed personality types and communication styles in order to make sense of their communication experiences. They described their communication style in ways suggesting that they see themselves as very open in their ways of communicating and leaning towards informal communication rather than formal. The data suggest informality and openness are not attributed to the sex-mix of the organisation, as CEOs of all three groups described their styles similarly. Although each CEO had their own unique sense of their personality, overall the participants were

very similar in how they prioritised informal communication and saw themselves to be very open as leaders. Describing their communication style as open and informal was just one of many examples of the CEOs doing identity work in the interviews. The excerpts below illustrate the ways openness and informality were incorporated into CEOs' (self-) identity work during the interviews.

"I think I'm very open [when communicating]." - Liz PF

"I mean I tend to probably be more of an informal communicator than a formal one." - Marie PM

"It's probably not my nature to be formal" - Stephanie PF

"I'm very open and honest and I consider myself to be quite authentic." - Hannah PM

"I'm quite open. I have a very open-door style" - Lisa MS

"I'm not formal at all. There's not one piece of me that's formal" - Kate PF

A preference for informal and open style with their employees saw many of the CEOs also prioritising the knowledge of personal information about their staff. In order to make sense of their own personal style, when asked about informal communication, the CEOs talked about how important they think it is to know personal details about their employees. They believe this knowledge helps them to communicate and build positive relationships within their organisation. The CEOs provided many examples of topics they feel are important to know and talk about with their staff. In doing so, they revealed a caring engagement with their employees and a willingness to understand their communication within the wider context of their personal lives. Using communication to build a connection with employees is clearly considered to be an integral part of managing the leader-member communication experience. In the following excerpts, Sally and Annie both state how important they find knowing personal details about their staff, while Kate asserts that caring about the individual as a person, rather than just an employee, is one of her main objectives. This suggests that the CEOs have a personal

style focused on creating deeper relationships with staff than can be achieved by only work-based communication. The following excerpts reveal how they made sense of their relational approaches. Some propose that knowing about their employees' lives is a way of expressing caring and shared humanity, while others' comments suggest that knowing is an end in itself. In contrast, Kate gives a very strategic rationale for getting to know her staff (See the underlined text for rationales).

"My number one objective is to care about them as human beings. That includes their family and their buying of a swimming pool and their going on holiday, the fact that their dog's getting groomed today and the fact their partner's sick, that matters, if they genuinely believe that I care about that, then they will genuinely care about the work we do." - **Kate PF**

"I know their husbands and wives and children's names and about their holidays and who's just had a grandchild and you know, we will chatter about that." - **Mary MS**

"Like I like to know what all my staff are doing so I can ask them what they're doing in the weekend and if they've had a good weekend. So I know a lot about them." - **Jane PM**

"I think what is important is not just my staff knowing about me but me knowing a bit about them, if they want to share that. And so there's nothing nicer I think than you know, going downstairs, walking the floor and just saying, "oh I heard your mum was in hospital the other week, how is she doing now?" Or, you know, you've just got a new dog, you know, and they were ripping up your shoes, you know, just something to have a conversation. Or you know, I hear you've come down here from Wellington and I used to live there and you know. Trying to find, um being not only interested, but also trying to find areas of common commonality." - **Sally MS**

"Look, I think it's really super important to be connected into your people. So the key things for me are, you know, how are you feeling, what's going on for you and that doesn't mean what's going on for you at work necessarily, that might mean, you know, did you get kids off to school today? You know, okay, you know, how are you

going with that issue that you're having at your house or whatever the case may be because I think that's really important. And recognizing that, um, you know, you don't, you can't separate off what's going on in the rest of your life when you walk in the office door and people have those challenges and we all have those challenges and um, it makes us more human.” - Annie MS

With regard to personal characteristics, the sex mix of the organisation is not regarded as important in the CEOs’ sensemaking accounts. The CEOs had worked in organisations with different sex mixes to their current one and used their experiences in these organisations as a measure against which to conclude that personality has a greater impact on communication experiences than a person’s gender. One executive who had previously worked in a very female-dominated sector even stated that before she had worked in her current mix-sex workplace she would have said that sex did have an impact on communication. Now that she has worked with males and females, she attributes the differences she experiences when communicating with employees to individual attributes other than a person gender.

“It's funny thing, you know, I think before starting in [gender diverse sport] I would have said that it made a difference, but now that I have worked with a number of guys who like I said that just really good people and really good communicators and really good leaders. I don't see the difference so much at all.” - Lisa MS

It is curious to note the prevalence of this somewhat atomistic view of the individual, which allowed sex to be treated as an independent, rather than integral, part of personality.

4.3 Category 2 - Organisational Profile

Alongside interlocutor profiles, the female executives showed a strong tendency to index their sensemaking accounts of communication with subordinates to the characteristics of organisations they have worked in, or to their perceptions of other workplaces and sectors (i.e., organisational profiles). The analysis confirmed that across all the interviews, two main factors were experienced as defining each

organisational profile. These factors, which were considered significant when making sense of communication experiences, were coded as:

1. Size
2. Organisational Culture

4.3.1 Size

The size of the organisation was considered a salient influence on communication in the workplace. Although a CEO may not have been an executive of a large corporate company at the time of interviewing, many of them had previously worked in these environments and were thus able to make sense of their communication experiences by referring to organisational size. The CEOs who spoke about larger corporations tended to view communication in these environments as hierarchal and corporate, a stark contrast to how they described communication in their smaller organisations. The following excerpts capture the way CEOs in this study used comparisons of size to make sense of their communication experiences.

“I’ve been in like a big organisation previously. I’ve been in, you know, 10, 20,000, so much larger organisations. So, um, the style of communication is quite different than those of course, so size has a big impact” - Marie PM

“I know in many organisations there is much more hierarchy and I think in a big organisation you need hierarchy in terms of accountability, but you don’t need hierarchy in terms of communication.” - Kate PF

“You can hear, you can almost hear the corporate bureaucracy coming through in someone’s communication when you’re working with the big organisations.” - Judy PF

The size of the organisation was also considered to impact on informal communication, not just between the CEOs and their subordinates, but also throughout their teams. The following interview excerpts capture how the CEOs related size to informal communication. Sally leads one of the biggest organisations in this study and attributes the high level of informal communication to the size of her team, not the total

organisation. Marie on the other hand led a very small organisation where informal communication, according to her accounts, flowed throughout. Comparing the two CEOs' data suggests that they conclude that number of people involved in communication determines the level of informality.

"Because we've got a small team, we have a lot of informal communication" – **Sally MS**

"You know, when you've only got five in an office, you know, it's pretty easy to communicate more informally." - **Marie PM**

The CEO of the largest firm interviewed had over 1,000 employees under her leadership. Although she did not make comparisons between her organisation and smaller companies, it was evident from her sensemaking accounts of her communication with direct reports, compared to those in the rest of the organisation, that the number of people involved made the communication significantly different. Unlike the other CEOs interviewed, there were many employees in her organisation who she did not have regular contact with due to the size of the operation. This clearly makes it difficult to communicate with the same level of informality as when communicating with her direct reports. Mary had multiple practices in place to facilitate communication with all staff. She ran a weekly blog and gave speeches at company events, but admitted that ensuring she was communicating with all people throughout the organisation was difficult. In the larger organisation, communication become more unidirectional, directing and less conversational. CEOs of the smaller organisations did not report facing these same issues. Although some may have stronger relationships with their direct reports, the size of their organisation means that they have contact with non-direct reports on a more regular basis and are able to participate in informal conversation to garner personal information. Since the CEO of the large firm cannot regularly communicate with all her employees, she is unable to have the same personal conversations as a CEO of a smaller firm may with people who don't report directly to her. This relates back to the excerpts above where Sally talked about informal conversation occurring in her team, but did not mention this type of communication across the organisation. The CEOs shared a sense that size of the organisation has a detrimental impact on informal communication with non-direct reports.

“But then when I do walk around, no one really stops and chats, they all say ‘hi’. They noticed you’ve been. But they don’t stop and talk. There are only a small number of people that have a little chat to you. Most people they won’t.” **Mary MS**

In contrast, the informal conversations nurtured in small organisations or small teams allow for personal information to be shared between CEOs and employees.

“....in a small community, my goodness, I didn’t just know my staff’s names. I knew their husbands, wives, kids, dogs, where they lived, you saw them in the supermarket everywhere.” - **Sally MS**

“But you know, I know the name of everybody in this organisation, I know where they grew up, I know more or less whether they’re partnered or single, whether they’ve got children or dogs and cats, how long they’ve been with us, you know, so in organisation of this size, so that’s quite important.” - **Liz PF**

As discussed previously, the majority of the CEOs viewed communication about areas of life outside of the organisation to be very important. Knowledge of personal information about subordinates, company size and informal communication were interconnected in the CEOs’ accounts of leader-member communication in a way that suggests they are experienced as mutually constitutive. The sex-mix of the organisation was not reflected in the CEOs’ sensemaking of organisational size.

4.3.2 Organisational Culture

There was also consensus among those interviewed that the culture of an organisation has a significant impact on the communication they experience throughout the workplace. The CEOs spoke positively about the culture of their own organisation and the effort they, as leaders, put into creating inclusive and diverse working environments. The excerpts below suggest that the first two CEOs believe a positive culture outweighs gender effects as an explanation for communication in their respective organisations. The third expresses a sense that gender is a contributing factor in the creation of a rich organisational culture.

“Team culture is my number one objective. Profitability comes in under there, but my number one objective is team culture because if the culture’s right then the rest of it takes care of itself.” - Kate PF

“I’m sure we have sexist people in the organisation just like we will have racist people but I think we’re pretty clear about what it is we expect, which is diversity makes your organisation a better place, not a worse place. And if you can’t get on board with it, you probably should work somewhere else” - Mary MS

“I haven’t seen anything that suggests to me that, that we have a culture that’s anything other than, you know, respectful of people’s technical capabilities and expertise. Um, regardless of what gender you are.... you know, when I think about gender, it’s interesting because you have all kinds of genders in organisations now and I’ve had transgender people that have worked for me and other things and I think it’s just all part of the richness of the culture that we have.” - Annie MS

The emphasis placed on organisational culture by the CEOs interviewed was aligned with the view that a successful organisational culture begins at the top. They highlighted their sense that they play an important role as leaders in ensuring a positive culture, and talked about the significance of leading by example. Organisational culture was seen to influence ‘how’ and ‘who’ people communicate with, so it was not surprising that the CEOs, because of their roles in developing and maintaining an organisation’s culture, consider that they play a big part in creating cultures that allow open and inclusive conversations. The CEOs seldom spoke directly about gender or sex effects in the organisation they lead. They seemed to have a sense that sex had a greater influence on their experiences outside the organisation, or in roles where they were not the CEO. The CEOs did not feel that sex significantly influenced communication with subordinates in their organisations. Their accounts suggest they believe that by fostering a positive organisational culture through their leadership, they have created a way of communicating that is not sexist, or at least is not characterised by negative gender effects. The following excerpts address the sensemaking process which some of the CEOs went through in order to determine their influence on organisational culture.

Jane even states that hiring new graduates helps the culture, but in the end it comes down to senior management.

“People look to, you know second tiers and myself to be able to do that. And then of course our job is very much about setting direction for the organisation and also resolving issues, but also, you know, things like generating the kinds of behaviours and values that are going to develop a culture that a positive culture for everyone and a great place to work.” - Annie MS

“Often it is different organisations have different vibes, probably from the leadership at the top and whether it's like, an open versus a more sexist kind of environment.” - Judy PF

“....but also set a vision internally around what sort of organisation you want, the shape of the organisation I think the real guts of it is you demonstrating what you're telling them, walking the talk” - Sally MS

“I mean, it helps that we hire graduates every year because that helps to bring fresh blood and things in, but I still think that if the culture's not right at the top, it's not going to filter down.” - Jane PM

“I've had to kind of, you know, kind of change the culture through that, you know, just through actions, you change it through your own actions. If you don't do it, then how would you expect anyone else to do it?” - Hannah PM

Interestingly Jill, who as mentioned previously has worked in the banking sector, praised the culture at her former workplace. Although other organisations in that sector may still have stereotypical values which are not inclusive of females, or are a “boys club” where communication between males and females is strained, this CEO had a different experience which she attributed to a good culture. Her descriptions of her experience support her sense that differences in organisations are not caused by the sex-mix, but by other factors such as organisational culture. A good culture in which everyone is focused on the outcomes of their job means that communication between

men and women in the organisation flows, and Jill did not feel that her sex influenced her communication experiences in this male dominated sector.

“So yes, there's an expectation that you're here to do a role and there is good knowledge about what you will bring and how you should bring it. There's good systems, good processors. A good culture.... a well-established culture” - Jill PM

Marie, the CEO of the male dominated sporting organisation, also attributes her experiences to organisational culture rather than the sex-mix of the organisation. She made sense of this by comparing the communication of other men she had worked with, to that of the men she interacts with in her current role. Her sense is that there is a significant difference in communication between their sporting organisation and other predominantly male organisations she has been in. She therefore is not prepared to attribute her experiences to sex, but finds the differences to be caused by culture.

“I think a lot of that has to do with the culture of [a male dominated sport] and it is a very male culture. Um, but then you can go into other male dominated organisations and they wouldn't communicate like that. So there's something else that's creating that communication style as well, not just the maleness, there's something else. Because I've been in other male dominated organisations or groups and they don't communicate like that.” - Marie PM

Another interesting concept that Liz talked about is the impact culture has on who wants to work for her organisation. She gave her example in terms of having conversations about rugby and concluded that she would not want to be in an organisation where those types of conversations were evident in the organisational culture, but she also believes that people with that interest would not be attracted to work in her organisation. This suggests that certain organisational cultures become embedded in workplaces because people who fit the culture want to work there, while those who do not fit would prefer not to.

“Um, so I guess we, we don't attract your real hard-nosed New Zealand blokes. They're not going to be attracted to come and work here. So there's a culture

here. Yeah. So a bloke who wanted to talk about rugby all the time, to be honest, wouldn't fit in, but is also unlikely to want to work here."

"But there are organisations where, you know, the tearoom will be dominated after the weekend by conversations about the game and it just bores me witless and I don't want to be part of it. Um, so I wouldn't choose an organisation that had that culture."

Liz PF

In contrast to what Liz proclaimed, the CEOs ensured a positive organisational culture, and therefore inclusive communication, by hiring people with the same values. The CEOs stressed how important it is for people they hire to fit the culture and values, so those who do not fit are unlikely to be hired. This suggests that it is not the sex-mix of an organisation that is influencing communication, but the values embedded in the organisation's culture. None of the CEOs expressed a sense that there is a sex or gender impact on the values held by people in their organisations, with many specifically stating that a person's sex would not impact on their chance of being hired. Values are deemed to be important to all sex-mix organisations, and the fact that each organisation is led by female CEOs is taken as evidence that values are not based on sex.

"For me, that's the most important thing. Are they the right person for the team?..... At the end of the day, it's about finding the right person for your team that is going to be able to deliver and communicate in the community in the way that you want them to and fit into the team in the way that your team is." - **Lisa MS**

"We work very hard when we recruit to find a values alignment because we're a very values-driven organisation. You need people with empathy. You need people who are really good community [sic], sort of have a community spirit, you know." - **Liz PF**

"I just can't imagine that they would get in the door really because when we hire it always goes through multiple team members." (Referring to someone with different value or style)

Judy PF

“So we’ve just been away with the partner group and we’ve just refreshed our values and things and it’s definitely something that I think is really important when I’m hiring people. That they are going to be a good cultural fit for us. Um so it’s definitely more values-based than anything else when I’m hiring.” Jane PM

Although some organisations in stereotypical male dominated sectors may still have internal communication and decisions shaped by gender perceptions, the data collected in this study suggests that the CEOs are much more inclined to explain their leader-subordinate communication to organisational culture, rather than to the gender of interlocutors, or the sex-mix of the organisation. They emphasised the importance of hiring people with the same values to ensure a positive organisational culture continues throughout the organisation.

Overall, the analysis suggests that, in the organisations led by the CEOs in the study, the sex-mix is not experienced as a major influence on the quality or form of their leader-subordinate communication. All CEOs believe in creating positive and inclusive organisational cultures, and believed they have achieved this in their respective organisations. Thus, their accounts have relatively few unsolicited mentions of either sex or gender effects. However we cannot ignore the possibility that, by not attributing experiences to such effects, they presented a sense to the interviewer that confirmed they have the skills to lead their organisations to an advanced state of operating, where sex does not have any influence.

4.4 Category 3 - Gender Stereotypes

When specifically asked, the CEOs gave a mix of opinions about the extent to which they believed the sex of the interlocutors impacted on leader-member communication. Some CEOs feel strongly that gender is not a defining factor in their workplace communication with subordinates, while others believe that there is an impact but it is less significant than other factors. The findings given so far in this chapter address those factors that the CEOs relied upon to make sense of their communication experiences. Despite the lack of emphasis on gender effects in the CEOs’ sensemaking, a close examination of their accounts revealed evidence that the CEOs are influenced by gender

stereotypes. Gender stereotyping was evident when CEOs made generalisations about the characteristics of an entire group. When asked specially about the impact of sex or gender on communication, the majority of CEOs denied any effect, or attributed their experiences to factors they consider more significant than gender. However, when asked general questions on male or female communication, they tended to revert to well-known gender stereotypes. This suggests that gender-based expectations were operating at a subliminal level. The following excerpts highlight some of the gender stereotypes reinforced by the CEOs as they discussed their sensemaking about workplace communication. Interestingly, Kate was very clear in her belief that gender did not influence communication, yet her opinions of men compared to women were not the same. She spoke very positively about women throughout her interview and at times supported positive female stereotypes. Mary and Liz both also reinforced positive gender stereotypes. We can see this in the representative excerpts below which suggest that, despite their claims to the contrary, gender-based expectations do contribute to the sense CEOs make of communication in the workplace.

“.....because women are already incredible. They really are. I've never met a woman who's not incredible, but I met lots of men who are average and it sounds terrible and I don't mean to say it like that, but in terms of women, they are often very passionate and purposeful and driven and can articulate themselves well and um, you know, want to do well and want to thrive.” - Kate PF

“On average I would say I think women pay more attention, do social referencing well.... And I think often women are better at conversations such as "so what did you and the wife and the kids do on the weekend" and how was your son's exam?” - Mary MS

“I think they have an advantage in empathy. Which can kind of can flow over into your ability to communicate.... I think women from a very early age are brought up to be empathetic and to be probably better communicators.” - Liz PF

“I think probably as females we would get closer to people. Um, in that informal sense because we probably share more and are more open.” - Jane PM

“Often maybe women are perhaps more connected to their emotions but not necessarily in a bad way. Um, I think it can be in a really helpful way. I think empathy is one of the biggest things in a work environment. If you can show empathy for people's situations then that takes you a long way.” - Annie MS

Some CEOs also reinforced male stereotypes such as “men talk more in certain situations” or that “they back themselves more than women do.” Interestingly, it was the CEOs of predominantly male organisations who made these generalizations. This suggests that although they may not be consciously aware of it, traditional male stereotypes are still present in their thinking and thus may be influencing how they communicate with men. Jill praised the way in which men handle situations, stating that she has adopted a male way of reacting, in her current position as a CEO of a predominantly female organisation. The interview transcripts are sprinkled with comments suggesting that into their sense-making, the CEOs were incorporating gender-based distinctions which meant they saw men communicating differently to women. The CEOs of predominantly female organisations talked in ways that reinforced positive female stereotypes over male stereotypes, while females in predominantly male organisations were inclined to do the opposite. This finding suggests that the mix of men and women in an organisation led by a female CEO does impact on the way they experienced their leader-subordinate communication. Gender-stereotypes, albeit subconsciously, operated and shaped their thinking. Below are three typical excerpts that illustrate how general gender-based stereotypes were evident in the interviews:

“...especially Kiwi New Zealand men they, they don't want to raise the roof; they'd rather raise their eyebrows, if you know what I mean. So if something really controversial happens, their response is typically understated, they'd rather raise their eyebrows then raise the roof about it.... And woman can tend to be a little bit critical, hypercritical of each other and of situations. So I had to dial that down a lot because it's just not in the nature of men to, to be as critical.” - Jill PM

“If I was a man I would've just said, Yep, Yep, I can do that. But as a woman, we tend to go, we well I don't know if I tick these boxes, I probably shouldn't. Or am I a fraud if I become a CEO?” - Hannah PM

“Yeah rather than perhaps a man who quite often goes into that fix-it mode or that logic mode and sometimes life is not about logic.” - Annie MS

“I think guys tend to talk a lot more in meetings, you know, the usual, which all the studies say, they tend to back themselves probably a lot more than we do.” - Marie PM

At times the CEOs were aware that they were making generalisations and specifically stated this in their interviews. Interestingly, Hannah and Sally both refer to cases where generalisations do not fit, yet overall they conclude that male and female behaviour does tend to fit into certain categories. A level of incongruence was evident across the interviews, which could be explained by a tension between the CEOs’ desire to on the one hand, present a gender-neutral analysis, and on the other, confess to making a less defensible analysis that incorporates gender-based stereotypes. They clearly were aware of the dangers of generalising, so were reluctant to provide unqualified generalisations, perhaps for fear of appearing less professional. In the following excerpts their ambivalence about using gender-based generalisations is evident (See underlining). It could be argued that this ambivalence, which is evidenced by the CEO pointing out her generalisation, is a form of identity work. The speaker could well be endeavouring to present a well-reasoned, and professional persona as befitting a leader (in their view).

“I guess maybe if women and men aren't self-aware, these are really big generalizations, but if women and men aren't very self-aware, men I think it's more out of naivety, woman I think it's more out of complexity and overthinking things. And being complicated, yeah.” - Jill PM

“I struggle to say this, but I actually prefer working with men than I do woman. Um, and that's not in all cases... but I actually enjoy working with men because they are kind of no nonsense, straight up, usually don't get offended with what you say. Um, and yeah, I just, I kind of enjoy that straight shooting, I mean it's a generalization and not all are the same obviously, but um, I do like the dynamic that you get with, you know, with men sort of teams.”

"I think generally speaking, men use fewer words than woman and that's another generalization because not all the time"

Sally GD

*"I think that women tend to be less black and white and have more emotional intelligence as a rule but in saying that though, I've worked for some terrible women that don't have any of that. So that's probably a bit of a generalization, but largely I think that woman's communication styles are quite different to men, largely with a few exceptions. So yeah think it does have an impact" - **Hannah PM***

*"There's quite a lot of research about being a woman CE, higher emotional intelligence, less stilted. These are generalizations, but I think I hear lots of basis and truth because I've got reasonably good EQ, I've been a counsellor and a mediator so I'm reasonably good but you know there are days when things are stressful and I bark at somebody and have to go and apologize. But you know a lot of men don't apologize." - **Mary GD***

Judy's sensemaking process during the interview saw her come to realise that gender-stereotypes were indeed influencing her thinking. When asked about female communication, the CEO initially reinforced gender stereotypes. It wasn't until she thought about her answers in greater depth, and applied these stereotypes to individuals who she interacted with, that she realised the stereotypes did not actually fit with what she was experiencing. In the excerpts below this CEO highlights that although her experiences interacting and communicating with men do not reflect stereotypical beliefs, she still has the tendency to revert to them in her thinking. The sensemaking of Judy and the generalisations discussed previously suggest that gender stereotypes do impact on the sense that she and other CEOs make of their leader-subordinate communication, and that we must not assume that, just because the CEOs would rather this was not the case, it is a factor that we cannot ignore.

"I'm just trying, I'm trying to figure out if I'm actually just reinforcing stereotypes or if I'm actually basing my thinking from what I've seen... I feel like men are more blurry and can go into a negative spiral versus women, but I am actually now

that I'm replaying lots of men I know. I don't think that's true for them and so I feel like my brain is still trapped in the old stereotypes.”

“So when I think about, um, lots of, you know, you think about men who I would say get put into boxes of not being good communicators and then there are lots who do communicate really, really well and yet because of the stereotype, like being put in that box when I'm actually running through men that I spend time with, in my team and on my board, and they're amazing communicators. So no, I probably, I don't agree with the stereotypes even though they still trapped my own thinking at times.”

Judy PF

4.4.1 Unconscious Gender Bias

The idea that sex or gender may unconsciously be affecting how sense is made of workplace communication was talked about by three CEOs. Without prompting, the CEOs below mentioned unconscious bias. They proposed that consciously, some people are not aware of the biases and stereotypes they hold towards things such as gender, but that there is an unconscious bias effect occurring in which gender-based expectations shape how communication occurs in organisations. In the following excerpts, the CEOs talk about their awareness of unconscious bias. Interestingly, Hannah even states that if a person is confronted by the fact that they are being influenced by gender they are likely to deny it. This relates to the findings presented earlier about the female CEOs who do not believe communication is affected by gender, yet are able to easily use gender-stereotypes in their sensemaking. Consciously, gender is not seen to be an impact, and thus when asked directly, the individual in question was not likely to attribute communication experiences to whether they were talking to a male or female. Although in Annie's explanation of unconscious bias she talks about race rather than gender, the same concepts apply in the way that demographic profiling subconsciously influences many people.

“....we all have an unconscious bias about particular things, you know, whether that be women's involvement in the sport or how women should be supported in the sport, you know, and all those sorts of things.”- Marie PM

“Yeah. I think those stereotypes exist, but subconsciously I don't think they're always conscious. I really believe that a lot of it's just programming.... So if you said to some people you know, you're quite bias [sic] in your decision making, they would go, no I'm not. I'm not sexist and I'm not racist. But it's that programming in their brains that they don't even realize exists” - Hannah PM

“It's that kind of unconscious bias kind of circumstance, you know..... you'd get, you know, John applying for a job and you get Mohammad applying for a job and John would get the interview, Mohammad would have the same degree and skills but wouldn't, um, and so what started happening over there is that people with Middle Eastern names and those sorts of things started writing John on their CVs and they are getting interviews. Yeah. Um, another experiment was they put a male name and a female name on the same CV, the male got an interview and the female didn't. So unconscious bias is really interesting.” - Annie MS

Two of the CEOs in the above excerpts also talked about their own unconscious bias. Again, Hannah comments on the idea that when people are asked directly, they are likely to deny a negative connotation, yet unconsciously this may be affecting their thinking and thus how they communicate with subordinates. By mentioning times in which they know they have held an unconscious bias, the CEOs are showing reflexivity and self-awareness. Their self-awareness allows them to recognize when people are unconsciously biased towards them because of their gender, but also notice when their own unconscious bias is affecting their communication experiences with others.

“I know that I have an unconscious bias and my husband tells me regularly that I have an unconscious bias that says men should do more housework than women and that comes from my circumstance, right? So I have always been the key breadwinner in my family and my husband has always had a slightly lesser role and done more of the parenting. And so part of me in my mind, I think he's got more free time so he should clean more toilets.” -Annie GD

“I mean I've probably got it. Definitely. I mean this is an example, [someone I work with] is morbidly obese. He's huge to the point where, you know, you can hear him coming in the hall because he's puffing like this. Now, if you said to me, are you

*biased against him because of his size? I would say no, but I'm pretty sure deep down I am. Because I come from a background where my mother always wanted to be skinny and she wanted me to be skinny and she really judged people, for her being overweight was the worst thing in the world. And I know that in my brain that's programmed in there somewhere and I'm quite sure that I judge him, but I wouldn't know how to start fixing that.” - **Hannah PM***

In the above excerpts there is an intellectual acceptance of unconscious bias as a legitimate construct for explaining experiences. The CEOs who discussed this concept showed awareness that both they and others have, underlying perceptions and expectation, which may influence communication experiences. This self-awareness cannot be attributed to the gender-mix of an organisation, but can be credited to certain training.

4.4.2 Training

The data suggests that self-awareness and recognition of unconscious bias comes from types of training that include experiences to enhance awareness of thinking processes and bias. The CEOs attributed their knowledge to training, such as a recent MBA and, in Annie's case, to a specific course on unconscious bias. It seems that training and education about unconscious bias does change how a CEO makes sense of their communication experiences. Without taking into account unconscious bias and stereotypes that are influencing thinking, the CEO may not see an underlying gender impact on communication. If Marie's and Annie's experiences are indicative, those who, either through training or other means are more aware of their own unconscious bias, will attribute their experiences to different factors than will someone who has not actively confronted their subconscious views.

*“Um, I think you do realize, I think it's, it's your awareness of the unconscious bias that they're showing and um, that's something I'm very aware of, but a lot of people wouldn't be and it's just because of some of the things that I've been exposed to. So I've had that sort of training and awareness and what have you...but it's not just guys, it can be women as well or it can be around a whole range of things.” -**Marie PM***

“It's that kind of unconscious bias kind of circumstance, you know. So, um, it's really interesting. I've done again more training but very lucky to do some work on unconscious bias in Australia.” - Annie GD

4.5 Conclusion

The CEOs' sensemaking accounts related to interlocutor profile suggest that the sociocultural background of employees is experienced by all 12 CEOs as impacting on the way they communicate or experience communication with subordinates. Specifically, CEOs attributed differences in communication to the interlocutor's upbringing, as well as their culture or ethnicity. Personal style of the employee and the CEO themselves are also considered by the CEOs to have an influence on communication experiences. Age related effects were the only factors discussed in a way that varied according to the male-female-mix of the CEOs' organisations. It seemed that the females in the study had experienced difference in communication depending on the age of the males in their organisations. Older men are considered to be less open and willing to communicate than their younger counterparts. The CEOs of predominantly female organisations, and some gender-diverse organisations, did not find that the same pattern occurred with females. Thus, they tended not to make comments about the age of their female employees.

The two concepts making up the organisational profile were size and organisational culture. The size of the organisation was suggested to affect the amount of informal communication throughout all three gender-mix organisations, as it becomes more difficult to communicate horizontally when the organisation gets larger. As mentioned, organisational culture was also found to be a distinguishing factor in how the CEOs made sense of different communication experiences. The CEOs who had worked in predominantly male organisations and had different experiences across workplaces attributed the differences to the organisational culture rather than the sex/gender mix.

Lastly, gender-stereotypes were identified as a factor in CEOs' sensemaking. Although the majority of the CEOs did not believe that gender had an impact on their communication experiences, when they were asked general questions about males and females, their responses tended to reinforce gender stereotypes. It was suggested by

some CEOs in the study that people hold unconscious biases that impact the way they think and act. Their suggestion, as supported by the analysis, highlights that gender stereotypes do introduce an unconscious bias which we can assume does impact at some level on the CEOs' communication with subordinates of the opposite sex or differing gender, even if they are not aware of it. Training and increased self-awareness were identified as ways in which to overcome unconscious bias.

Overall, the CEOs use a variety of factors and concepts to make sense of their leader-subordinate communication. Although many of these were identified by CEOs across all three gender-mix organisations, it was found that consideration about age had a greater impact on the sense made of communication experiences by CEOs in predominantly male and gender diverse organisations. The CEOs leading these types of organisation considered that generational effects influenced how male subordinates communicated with them, but not females. In terms of gender stereotyping, the gender-mix of the organisation impacted on which stereotypes the CEO reinforced. Interestingly, the CEOs in predominantly male organisations tended to reinforce positive male stereotypes, while the CEOs of predominately female organisations were inclined to emphasise positive female stereotypes. The following chapter will provide a full discussion of the findings as well as suggest further academic and practical implications of the study.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This study sought to understand the sense female CEOs made of their communication experiences in different sex-mix organisations. It examined communication from the perspective of the leaders and found several factors that appear to influence how the participants make sense of communication experiences. The analysis revealed that three main factors were prevalent: (1) Interlocutor profile (2) Organisational profile (3) Gender stereotypes. In the chapter that follows these factors will be discussed in detail and in relation to relevant literature. Research implications are then presented, highlighting the contributions to theory and practice that this study makes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and the future direction that can be taken from the findings.

5.2 Interlocutor Profile

5.2.1 Sociocultural Background

Holmes, Marra, and Vine (2011) propose that ethnic values underpin how individuals create their identity and thus influence the way in which they interact with others. The present study found that ethnicity and/or the person's culture were judged by the CEOs to account for both the way they communicated and the way they liked to be communicated with. Female CEOs in the study described experiences they had with subordinates of different culture and suggested that this diversity influenced the way in which the leader-subordinate interaction occurred. When sex and culture were identified as contributing to how they experienced communication with subordinates, culture/ethnicity was seen to have a greater impact. The experiences that the CEOs identified are consistent with the work of Karsten (2006) who states that all individuals unconsciously communicate according to their own cultural paradigms, which seem common practice until they interact with someone whose communication behaviour is informed by a different cultural paradigm. Cultural differences are said to "lead to misconceptions and miscommunication between people from different cultural backgrounds" (Fine, 1996, p. 492), which is what the CEOs would have been experiencing in order to make sense of the cultural impact on communication.

Upbringing was also suggested to influence an individual's communication and in turn, the experiences the CEOs had when engaging in leader-subordinate communication with them in the workplace. The recognition of the importance of upbringing is in line with findings that show a child's identification of race, gender, and culture is regularly shaped by the family environment and the upbringing process (Arnanian-Kepuladze, 2019; Kanka, Wagner, Buchmann, & Speil, 2019; Perszyk, Lei, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Waxman, 2019). Upbringing and culture are interconnected, as how a person is raised influences the cultural values they hold, and an individual's cultural values, which they are exposed to at a young age, also influence how they are raised. Even when not discussing culture, the CEOs emphasised the influence of a person's upbringing on the way they communicate, and it was suggested that parents play a vital role in shaping their child's communication. This mirrors literature stating that the way individuals communicate is shaped at a young age by parents and other authority figures (Wodak 1997; Eccles, 1999; Barker et al., 2009). For future workplaces to thrive, the CEOs suggest that children are raised with the skills to communicate inclusively of both culture and gender.

In order to conclude that upbringing and culture impacted on communication, the CEOs identified past experiences in which they have seen these factors as influential. This is in line with research done by Bute and Jensen (2011) who found that when females make sense of a phenomenon, they will create narratives that are informed by their own experiences. Using personal experiences to make sense of phenomena was not only restricted to sensemaking of upbringing and culture, but also used throughout the interviews, to varying degrees, to explain other influences on communication experiences. In terms of determining a difference between sex-mix, the sex make-up of the organisation did not impact on the CEOs' sensemaking of culture and upbringing. The CEOs concluded that males and females alike were influenced by their cultural backgrounds and parental upbringing and therefore parents of the next generation need to ensure that they are teaching their children inclusivity and gender equality.

5.2.2 Age-related Effects

In addition to sociocultural factors, there was a sense that age influenced communication experiences. The CEOs used the age of their subordinates to explain differences in communication, highlighting generational effects that are relevant in organisations. Associated literature suggests that given the different sociocultural environments that people are immersed in during their formative years, traits and personality should differ across generations (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, 2006; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). The CEOs found generational effects most evident in their younger employees, claiming that they were less formal, more confident, and appreciated greater feedback. This is in line with literature on ‘millennials’, who are said to prefer more open and frequent communication with their supervisors (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

The CEOs believed that there was a difference in how males of different age groups communicated with them, due to younger employees favouring more open and frequent communication. CEOs who worked in gender diverse or predominantly male organisations commented on how younger men in their organisations were more willing to communicate with them, in terms of asking for help or collaborating. Interestingly, those in predominantly female organisations also recognised a difference in how older and younger males, with whom they interacted on boards and other similar environments, communicated with them. The findings support Risman’s (2017) notion that the gender structure (generation) into which the individual has been born will have a significant influence on their perceptions of males and females. Older men in the workplace may have grown up in a society where women had less opportunities and were treated differently in organisations, thus the way they communicate is still influenced by this gender structure. Although gender and sex are not completely irrelevant in today’s society, younger males will have grown up in an environment with greater gender equality, and thus are more open and willing to communicate with females. Interestingly, the CEOs did not express the same concerns with females of different ages. This suggests that the age of subordinates has a greater impact in predominantly male and part sex-mixed organisations, than it does in organisations that are predominantly female. Therefore, when considering the impacts of age on communication, the sex make-up of an organisation may in fact influence how female CEOs make sense of their experiences.

Age was also found to have an influence on how female CEOs identified themselves. Being the same age as their subordinates' parents meant that some CEOs have created identities of themselves as parental figures. Identity construction is said to be at the root of sensemaking as it influences how everything is understood (Mills, 2003; Weick, 1995). The ways in which CEOs make sense of their experiences are thus influenced by their own self-identity. Even though a subordinate may not see their leader as a parental figure, when the CEO adopts this perception into their own identity, this in turn influences the way they interact, communicate, and make sense of their experiences. What individuals believe themselves to be (self-identity), shapes how they act and thus influences how others see and treat them (Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld, 2005). Therefore, if a CEO identifies themselves as the same age as their subordinates' parents they are likely to communicate and act in a parental manner. This may in turn cause their subordinates to view them as parental figures, thus consolidating their identity. The impact of age on identity was also relevant for the youngest CEO. Although she did not face the challenge of being seen as a parental figure, she did have to navigate how subordinates of her own age perceived her. Creating an identity as an authority figure, not a friend, helped to ensure that her employees also viewed her in this way. Self-identity was evident throughout all the interviews and will be discussed further in relation to personal attributes and organisational culture.

5.2.3 Personal Style

The personality and communication style of an individual was found to be a significant factor in the sense that female CEOs made of their experiences. Without prompting, CEOs thoroughly discussed the variances in communication, which they attributed to personality and style. Unlike the vast amount of research that looks at defining differences between male and female communication styles (Carli, 2006; Sullivan, 2004; Merchant, 2012), the CEOs did not once attribute the differences in personality or style to a person's sex. This mirrors research, which suggests that there are minimal communication differences between male and females, which are of social importance (Wilkins & Anderson, 1991; Birdsall, 1980; Sadler & Woody, 2003). The CEOs reflected on both men and women they had communicated with in the past and comfortably concluded that they could not put them in groups when it came to aspects of communication. Personality traits are known to influence a person's communication

style and determine the methods of communication used by individuals in the workplace (Solaja, Idowu, & James, 2016). This is in line with the CEOs perceptions that if men and women have the same or different personality or style, then this influences the way they communicate, rather than the person's sex.

Identity work was also evident during sensemaking of personal attributes. The CEOs described their own communication style and personalities, which reflected a sense of openness and informality. Interestingly across the different sex-mix organisations, the CEOs described themselves in very similar ways, thus it was not possible to distinguish those who ran predominantly male organisations by looking at the CEOs' personality and style of communicating. Personal identities can grow from particular qualities or attributes of a person, but they can also derive from demographic characteristics, such as gender (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018). The CEOs viewed themselves as open and informal communicators, which in turn made them prioritise knowing personal details about their employees. This relational approach to communication is in line with research that proposes that females communicate in order to 'enhance social connections and create intimate relationships' (Merchant, 2012, p. 45). Interestingly, the CEOs did not overtly attribute their openness and ability to create relationships to the fact that they are female. They instead viewed this as a part of their personality or chosen communication style.

Literature on implicit leadership theories states that individuals have an internal model of leadership, which is comprised of the preconceptions they have about traits and characteristics they bring to a leadership position (Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, & Coyle, 2017). The CEOs in the study expressed the view that openness, informality, and relationship-building are essential to a leader. Interestingly, masculinity is known as a common implicit leadership theory (Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994), yet the women in this study, even those leading predominantly male organisations, had the preconceived notion that more stereotypical female traits were necessary for successful leadership. The sex-mix of the organisation thus did not affect what implicit leadership theories were held by the CEOs, as all expressed similar assumptions around what makes an effective leader.

5.3. Organisational Profile

5.3.1 Size

The CEOs often used the size of an organisation to account for the communication that was occurring within. This was facilitated by the fact that many of the CEOs lead small to medium organisations, but had prior experience working with and/or for larger firms. This allowed them to compare the communication that occurred with a smaller number of employees to that occurring in large, corporate companies. The CEOs introduced issues surrounding bureaucracy and hierarchy in larger organisations and used these to produce a positive contrast with their own smaller organisations and advocate for the level of informality that smaller organisations facilitate. Although the CEOs were still careful about keeping their relationships with their subordinate's professional, less employees in their organisation allowed them to communicate with greater informality with all, even if they were not direct reports. This mirrors literature which has found that in small firms, the division of labour is less formalized, which evidently has an effect on the degree of formality in the organisation (Tsai, Sengupta, & Edwards, 2007). Since the CEOs have contact with the majority of their subordinates on a regular basis they are able to build a greater rapport with them than can leaders who only see their employees in passing, or at all-staff events. The CEOs who reported having frequent informal conversation with their employees were also the ones who reported knowing the most personal information about their staff.

The CEO of the largest organisation in the study confirmed the effect of size on communication experiences. Unlike her fellow CEOs, she was unable to interact and communicate with a large number of her employees, due to the high level of subordinates under her leadership. Although she had strong relationships with her direct reports and regularly communicated in an informal manner with this group, she referred to the challenges she faced in communicating with those she did not frequently have contact with. This mirrors research that has found that larger organisations adhere more closely to the chain of command, whereas in smaller, more intimate organisations, horizontal communication is more likely (Ghobadian & Galleary, 1997). This was evident for the CEO leading the largest organisation in this study. Through no fault of her own, the sheer size of her organisation impacts on her ability to communicate horizontally, thus her informal communication remains within her circle of direct

reports. Overall, the analysis suggested the CEOs experienced size, informality and communication as interconnected in a mutually constitutive way.

Regardless of the sex make-up of the firm, the number of employees in an organisation affects the amount of informal communication that occurs throughout the organisation. The size of the organisation also influences the CEO's ability to communicate with her subordinates, whether the organisation is predominately male, female or mixed-sex. This has implications for female CEOs who value open and informal communication and indicates why the CEO of the largest organisation was frustrated that she could not communicate with everyone in her organisation with the same level of openness. Lastly, the size of the organisations involved in the study can also explain, in part, why the CEOs identified themselves as open and informal communicators. Identity-work is not only influenced by the person, but also by their external environment and social context (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018), thus when CEOs are in organisations which facilitate open and informal communications, such as small firms, their identity is reinforced.

5.3.2 Organisational Culture

In addition to the organisation's size, organisational culture was seen by the CEOs to have a significant influence on their communication experiences. The CEOs spoke positively about the culture of the organisation they led, describing inclusive working environments where gender did not impact communication. This mirrors literature stating that a supportive and well-designed organisational culture needs to be in place for the benefits of gender diversity to be achieved (Dwyer, Richard, & Chadwick, 2003). Emphasis was also placed on how organisational culture starts from the top down, thus the CEOs must lead by example in terms of how they want their subordinates to communicate. It is widely acknowledged that leadership plays an important part in setting the tone of communication within the organisation and influences employee attitudes and behaviour (Men, 2015). This is an implicit leadership theory, which clearly influenced the CEOs in this study. Their perceptions of leadership mean that they feel it is important to lead by example and thus create positive and inclusive organisational cultures. CEOs from across the three sex-mix organisations all proposed the relationship between top leadership and organisational culture was closely linked to the leadership style of the CEO, rather than the sex-mix of the organisation.

The CEOs also disclosed that hiring the ‘right’ people ensured a positive organisational culture. They were clear on the fact that when hiring new people for their organisation they look closely at how the person will fit, in terms of their values, supporting the notion that an effective recruitment process is one that identifies individuals who will act in accordance to the organisation’s values (Rapping, 2012). Hiring people who fit with their organisational values means that the CEOs can shape and evolve their organisations. The CEOs also attributed their subordinates’ ability to communicate with each other and their leaders, regardless of sex, to the value alignment evident in the organisation. This mirrors literature which states that values are positively associated with types of communication styles (Park & Kim, 2008), thus when individuals have the same values, they are likely to communicate in the same manner and there will be less issues surrounding communication in the workplace. In many ways the CEOs were aligned with a CCO perspective of organisational communication (Blaschke, Schoeneborn & Seidl, 2012; Wright, 2016). They seemed to recognise at some level that without communication the organisation fails to exist, therefore creating effective communication, through values-based hiring techniques, influences the scope, extent and structure of their organisation (Beckett, 2003) and, in so doing, constitutes it.

The presence of women in corporate leadership has been said to be associated with the absence of discriminatory attitudes toward females in the workplace (Noland, Moran & Kotschwar, 2016). The CEOs did not feel that gender or sex affects applied to how they communicate with their subordinates in their organisation, or how subordinates communicated with them, because alongside hiring people with similar values, their leadership style served to reduce effects of gender and thus create a better organisational culture. Even in the male dominated organisations, the CEOs did not see or feel a significant gender effect playing out in their leader-subordinate communication. This is not to say that all the organisations in this study no longer discriminate against male or female gender, but the accounts of the CEOs who participated in this study highlight how a strong organisational culture, built on shared values, in their experience, has a greater influence on equality than the sex make-up of their organisation.

5.4 Gender Stereotypes

Throughout the interviews, each of the CEOs had a unique perspective on the extent to which sex or gender influenced communication both inside and outside of their organisation. Although many thought they had not felt the impact of gender throughout their career, interestingly, after close examination of their accounts, it was found that gender stereotypes are still evident in their storytelling and narratives. Gender stereotyping appears to occur on a subliminal level, as when asked directly about the impact of gender on communication, the CEOs did not see it as a major issue. Instead, they attributed differences in communication to the factors explained above, such as personality and sociocultural effects. In contrast, when asked general questions about males and females, the CEO would revert back to gender stereotypes. This mirrors literature that argues that despite changes in participation and acceptance of women, gender stereotypes are still deeply embedded in society and still strongly influence perceptions of males and females (Haines, Deaux, & Lofarno, 2016; Due-Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Despite claims that interlocutor gender does not influence their communication expectations, the analysis suggests that male and female gender stereotypes do, at some level, influence both expectations and the sense made of communication experiences.

Interestingly, the CEOs did not tend to stereotype themselves, yet when talking about males and females in general, they easily identified traits and characteristics that they associated with a specific sex. These included more relational and emotional stereotyping of women, compared to typical male stereotyping, such as dominance in conversations and more confidence to back themselves. It was the CEOs of predominantly male organisations, or those who had worked in predominantly male sectors, who tended to make the generalisations about men, and vice versa for CEOs in predominantly female organisations. The literature suggests that gender stereotypes are relevant in every social interaction and have an undeniable, ever-present influence on how people behave, whether they are aware of it or not (Holmes & Meyeroff, 2008). Therefore, this suggests that in predominately male organisations, because the CEOs will interact regularly with men, they will continuously reflect on male stereotypes, even if it is unconsciously. This is the same for females in predominantly female and mixed-sex organisations. Certainly, this study found that the male-female-mix of an

organisation did influence the stereotypes used and provided an explanation for why the CEOs tend to revert to certain gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, a level of incongruence was evident across the interviews, as although the CEOs clearly wanted to present a gender-neutral analysis, it was still evident that gender stereotypes influenced thinking, and thus how sense was made of communication. In many cases the CEOs stated that they were making ‘generalisations’ as a way to weaken the impact of the gender stereotypes they were using. They were aware that not everyone fits into a male and female stereotype, yet the analysis revealed that there is still a tendency to observe male and female behaviour through a gendered lens. The notion of unconscious bias was discussed by the CEOs in the study and can be used to explain the inconsistencies in their observations of gender.

5.4.1 Unconscious Bias

As noted, unconscious bias is a concept that was discussed by some CEOs, and one that fits with the findings of this study. According to the CEOs, people have biases that exist subconsciously and influence the way they act, and therefore communicate. This is in line with research that states gender biases are not as blatant as they were in the past, but still appear unconsciously in every aspect of life (Easterly & Ricard, 2011). The CEOs even stated that if one was to tell a person they are biased, they would likely deny it, because they are not consciously aware of it. This relates to the accounts of some CEOs in the study who claimed that gender had little to no effect, yet still reinforced gender stereotypes. They did not acknowledge any personal gender-related bias or stereotyping, but still considered that these are very dominant in society. At the same time they revealed stereotypical thinking in some sensemaking accounts, which suggests that they actually were unconsciously contributing to the presence of the bias.

The CEOs whose accounts revealed unconscious bias also talked about the biases they themselves held. Although these were not specifically gender-orientated, they talked about how they have come to realise that, in the past, they had unconsciously shown a preference for people like themselves, or in situations similar to their own, and a bias towards individuals unlike them. This is consistent with literature that proposes that individuals show an unconscious preference due to gender, race, and other aspects of

identity, and will often favour the group that they are a part of, even if they claim they have no preference (Fiarman, 2016). It shows that when an individual holds unconscious or implicit bias, this bias is known to manifest itself in the behaviour of that person (Jolls & Sunstein, 2006). CEOs who deny gender bias, or who do not make a conscious effort to think about underlying influences, may unknowingly be letting gender and other factors influence their communication with subordinates. The study showed that the gender mix of the organisation does not have a significant impact on the ability to be aware of such bias.

5.4.2 Training

Training allowed a sub-group of CEOs to be more self-aware, and recognise bias, which subconsciously influenced themselves and others. This is in line with literature that suggest that education about unconscious bias, and teaching strategies that can be used to overcome the effects, are significant in reducing gender bias in the workplace (Girod, et al., 2016). This literature suggests that, although gender effects in the workplace are not as evident as they once were, this does not mean that they are now irrelevant. Women and men are still not equal in the workplace and a reason for this is unconscious bias (Easterly & Ricard, 2011). The CEOs in the study who had participated in some form of self-awareness training will be less likely to let gender influence their communication with subordinates. An implicit leadership theory shared between these three CEOs was the importance of self-awareness in leadership. Whether this was to do with gender or not, these CEOs made a conscious effort to understand their own thinking, which they felt made them better leaders and communicators. The sex-mix of an organisation was not found to affect the level of self-awareness of the CEO. It is therefore appropriate to propose that CEOs in any sex-mixed organisation would benefit from unconscious bias training, as it would lead to greater awareness of gender stereotypes, which are evident in all communication experiences.

5.5 Research Implications

Whilst there has been substantial research surrounding many aspects of communication in the workplace, female CEOs are a group that seem to be overlooked, especially in relation to how they experience the leadership role and their leadership communication. Considering the significant gender gap that still exists in top leadership roles (Esser,

2018) and the view that communication constitutes the organisation, the need to understand the sense that female CEOs make of their communication experiences stands out as a demanding examination. This thesis has accomplished the goal of addressing this gap by looking more closely at and provide a range of insights that advance our understanding of female CEOs and the sense they make of their leadership communication in organizations with varying sex-mixes among their worker populations.

At an overarching level, the CEOs' sense about their experiences provides support for previous findings surrounding female leadership and also communication. The data supports statements regarding the effect of sociocultural factors on communication styles (Holmes, Marra, and Vine, 2011), the impact of size on informal communication (Tsai, Sengupta, & Edwards, 2007), the effects of a positive organisational culture on gender equality (Dwyer, Richard, & Chadwick, 2003) and the relational communication styles of females (Merchant, 2012). Contrary to commonly held assumptions, the sense that the female CEOs made of their communication experiences was similar, rather than different, across the three different sex-mix environments. This finding contributes to literature on gendered communication, and gives credibility to the side of the debate which states that there are minimal communication differences between males and female and little which are of great social importance (Wilkins & Anderson, 1991).

The findings suggest that there are various factors that CEOs are consciously aware of when making sense of leader-member communication, but few relate to the sex of the interlocutors. The age of a male interlocutor was the only sex-related theme that the female CEOs, specifically those in predominantly male organisations, incorporated into their sensemaking accounts. The CEOs concerned suggested that as the new generation comes through and the old moves out, such influences on male-female communication will diminish. Overall, the sensemaking accounts suggest that the CEOs expect that communication between males and their female leaders in work places will become less strained.

This study revealed sensemaking framework (using an interpretive research approach), which the female CEOs drew on to make sense of their communication with

subordinates, across the different types of organisation. Notable by their absence were themes to do with gender. However, further analysis revealed that gender considerations were in operation at a subliminal level. This led to the conclusion that gender stereotyping was occurring unconsciously. This thesis proposes that even though female CEOs may not be consciously aware of it, they still hold gender stereotypes which influence the way they interpret how they and their subordinates act and communicate. Taking into consideration the findings of previous studies that suggest that there is no significant difference in the ways male and females communicate, this finding warrants further research and managerial attention. It could be argued that there is a need for bias sensitivity training, not just for women, but also for everybody in roles of authority and leadership. Certainly, there is evidence supported by some participants' accounts that the self-awareness that comes from training and knowledge about unconscious bias helps to overcome gender stereotyping and create greater sex equality within the workplace (Girod, et al., 2016).

Although a connection between unconscious bias and gender stereotyping is apparent from the findings, this research was not specifically directed at exploring such a link and therefore was not able to examine the extent of the effect, but simply ascertain its existence. Whilst this topic requires further in-depth research, the study still contributes to our understanding of how female CEOs make sense of communication experiences. It found that the three different sex-mixes in the organisations had little effect on the CEOs' sensemaking about their leadership communication. Culture, upbringing and gender-stereotyping had much greater influence on how the CEOs made sense of their member-leader communication and consequently should be explored in greater detail in a larger study.

5.6 Limitations of Research and Future Studies

Due to the small female CEO pool in New Zealand and the difficulty of acquiring participants, a larger sample was not possible. A larger research sample would have allowed the researcher to take into account the business sector of the organisations in the analysis. Ideally each sector should have had CEOs from a predominantly male, female and mixed-sex organisation. Also, the majority of the CEOs interviewed led small or medium size firms, with the exception of Mary who ran a significantly larger

organisation. Although conclusions were made relating to the size of the firm and the impact on informal communication, if more CEOs of larger firms had agreed to be interviewed, a more in-depth analysis could have been presented.

This study did not set out to study unconscious bias, so the fact that this emerged as significant is testimony to the usefulness of an inductive exploratory approach. Conducting a study specifically to explore the relationship between CEOs and unconscious bias would be a beneficial future direction. A study assessing training methods used to reduce unconscious bias would also provide a helping hand for leaders across organisations. Throughout the interviews the CEOs also mentioned communication experiences with people outside of their organisation. These experiences often differed to those they had inside their organisation, thus a study exploring these effects may be useful for academics and practitioners. As mentioned previously, it would be interesting to be able to compare sectors in the research, as this could provide more nuanced explanations of factors this study found influenced the sense made of by CEOs of their leader-subordinate communication.

5.7 Conclusion

This thesis presents a rich picture of female CEO sensemaking behaviour. In doing so, it highlights that the mix of sexes in an organisation has little conscious effect on the sense female leaders make of leader-member communication experiences, but that this is not the whole story. Unconscious gender bias was evident in the sensemaking accounts. It was found that the sociocultural background of an individual, such as their upbringing and culture, was perceived by the CEOs to influence the way their employees communicate with them (i.e., in leader-member exchanges). The findings also revealed that age is perceived to have a greater influence on male workers' communication compared to female workers' communication, but with the next generation coming through it was assumed that this will become less of an influence. The CEOs' sense was that when people have the same personality types they communicate in the same way, thus personality and communication style was seen as having a greater influence than sex and associated gender. Furthermore, the existence of organisational factors were found to influence communication and how it was interpreted. For example, the level of informality surrounding communication was

attributed to the size of the organisation, while the organisational culture was seen to influence positive and inclusive communication.

5.7.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes five noteworthy theoretical contributions about how female CEOs make sense of their leader-subordinate communication experiences.

First, it contributes unique insights about the two key categories of factors that were woven into CEOs' sensemaking accounts, interlocutor profile and organisational profile, and how they shape the conscious sense CEOs made of their leader-member communication in the workplace. These factors were largely treated as independent of any gender effects, which supports one side of the debate among scholars: the argument that proposes there is little significant difference between how males and females as groups communicate (Wilkins & Anderson, 1991; Birdsall, 1980; Sadler & Woody, 2003). The sensemaking of CEOs in this study therefore goes against research that aims to highlight differences in male and female communication styles (Carli, 2006; Sullivan, 2004; Merchant, 2012). In general, this study complements previous studies on organisational communication by providing a framework that introduces a new focus on the male-female mix of staff, and sex of the CEO. At the same time, the sense the CEOs made of their leader-subordinate communication supports the findings from studies on the benefits of a strong organisational culture (Dwyer, Richard, & Chadwick, 2003; Rapping, 2012) and studies that have found different socio-cultural environments between generations may cause differences in communication styles (Lyon & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, 2006; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008).

Second, the study's most compelling contribution is the discovery that the CEOs were largely unaware of the gender biases shaping some of their sensemaking accounts. A largely unconscious bias seemed to be operating, with only a few CEOs acknowledging its existence when asked to reflect on their experiences, suggesting it is not enough to rely on openly acknowledged factors when developing a model of the effect of sex mix on how communication is experienced by CEOs.

Third, in this regard, the study found that the sensemaking of the CEOs in predominantly male organisations tended to reinforce positive male stereotypes, while the CEOs of predominately female organisations were inclined to emphasise positive female stereotypes. It can be argued that an identity effect is operating that warrants further and more in-depth analysis using a more substantial dataset.

Fourth, interlocutors' background, including their upbringing and cultural narratives, was a factor that was frequently indexed to make sense of communication with individual interlocutors. This suggests the CEOs sensemaking was not just about present-day cues, but also about knowledge and perceptions of what the interlocutor brings from their past to their engagement with their CEO. These are not a themes that feature strongly in the organisational sensemaking literature.

Finally, the analysis suggested the CEOs experienced size, informality, and communication as interconnected, in a mutually constitutive way. This can be easily explained and has been explored in the literature (e.g., Tsai, Sengupta, & Edwards, 2007; Ghobadian & Galleary, 1997), but seemed to be a particularly salient understanding that provided a platform for the CEOs to celebrate the quality of their leader-subordinate communication compared to that in larger organisations.

5.7.2 Practical Contributions

As noted earlier in this conclusion, the key finding was that the CEOs' sensemaking accounts suggested gender stereotypes were influencing how they made sense of leader-member communication, even though they were not consciously aware of this influence. From a practical perspective, this suggests that education and training surrounding unconscious biases could be beneficial in organisations in order to diminishing the subliminal and potentially negative effects of ongoing gender stereotyping by female CEOs. The need for training to improve sensitivity to this bias and its potential effects was not raised. As such, the study's findings provide support for the proposal that gender bias sensitivity training should be a component of CEO induction.

The study also found that there are interlocutor factors that the CEOs considered important when they accounted for their communication experiences. These factors featured more commonly than the other categories of factors in the CEOs' accounts of their experiences, suggesting that the CEOs focus more on individual attributes, rather than workplace structures and dynamics, to make sense of communication. This suggests that workshops introducing female CEOs (and probably CEOs generally) to the implications of the CCO perspective for understanding communication could be valuable, causing them to reconsider their sensemaking cues and the consequences of their sensemaking.

In conclusion, this study set out to address a gap in the literature regarding female CEOs' communication experiences. By looking at CEOs leading organisations with three different sex-mixes, the study has provided new and useful insights that have both practical and theoretical implications for aspiring and current female CEOs.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 –Information Sheet for Interview Participants



Department: Management, Marketing & Entrepreneurship

Telephone: 0278415953

Email: maxine.osborn@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

[Date]

HEC Ref:

Communication experiences in different sex-mix organisations. Information Sheet for participant

My name is Maxine Osborn and I am a post-graduate student at the University of Canterbury. Currently I am working towards my Master's in Management, which requires me to write a thesis on a chosen topic. The aim of my research is to determine how female leaders interpret their communication experiences in different gender-mix organisation. In order to do this, I need to interview female leaders from different gender-mix organisations (predominantly male, predominantly female and gender-diverse).

You have been approached to take part in this study because you have achieved an executive leadership role in your organisation. I would be honored to have the opportunity to interview you and hear about your experiences as a leader. I have located your contact details through your organisation's website.

If you choose to take part in this study, your involvement in this project will include a 60-90minute interview in which you will be asked to describe experiences you have had as a leader

and the communication associated with such a role. It is your choice as to whether you give permission for this interview to be audio recorded. If you agree you will be sent a copy of the transcribed data and given the opportunity to remove anything you choose. If you choose for the interview not to be recorded, then you will be given access to the notes I will take during the interview. You will also be given the opportunity to remove anything you wish from these notes. If you haven't responded to the opportunity to edit within ten days, it will be assumed that there are no changes that need to be made. In the event where further questions need to be asked, I will aim to do so either by email or phone, but the majority of information will be collected during the sit-down interview.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. You may ask for your raw data to be returned to you or destroyed at any point. If you withdraw, I will remove information relating to you. However, once analysis of raw data starts on December 20th, it will become increasingly difficult to remove the influence of your data on the results.

The results of the project may be published, but you can be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation. A thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library, but your name and your company name will not be used in the project. Only the research team (myself and my supervisors) will know who the participants in the project are. You will be given a code, which will be used when talking about you and your experiences. Data will be kept on a password-protected computer in a locked room. After 5 years all data will be deleted. Depending on the findings, a larger study might be done. Data may be used again if I choose to expand on the research in order to complete a PhD.

Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive a copy of the summary of results of the project, as we are happy to share with you what has come from this research.

The project is being carried out under the supervision of Colleen Mills who can be contacted at colleen.mills@canterbury.ac.nz. She will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to participate in the study, you are asked to complete the consent form and return by email maxine.osborn@pg.canterbury.ac.nz.

Appendix 2 –Consent Form for Interview Participants



Department: Management, Marketing & Entrepreneurship

Telephone: 0278415953

Email: maxine.osborn@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

Communication experiences in different sex-mix organisations

Consent Form for participant

- ☐ I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.
- ☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.
- ☐ I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential and will only be able to be accessed by the research team.
- ☐ I understand that any published or reported results will not identify the participants or their companies and I also understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library
- ☐ I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- ☐ I give permission for the data collected in this project to be used if the researcher decides to undergo further studies.
- ☐ I understand that I can contact the researcher Maxine Osborn or supervisor Colleen Mills for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([human-](#)

ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

- ☐ I would like a summary of the results of the project.
- ☐ By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____ Signed: _____ Date: _____

Email address (*for report of findings, if applicable*):

Appendix 3 – Interview Guide

- Can you tell me the story of how you came to be a CEO?

Subordinate Communication:

- Can we start then by talking about your team (those who report directly to you) and how you communicate with them?
 - The make-up of your team (who does it consist of)?
 - How would you describe communication within your team?
- Tell me about the formal communication you engage in with staff?
- Tell me about the informal conversations you have?

Organisational Communication:

- I am interested in the communication you have with people at different levels in the organisation. How would you describe the communication you engage in across the organisation? Does it differ from those in your immediate circle
 - If so – why is this?
- Are there a group of people you feel more comfortable communicating with?
- Do you think gender shapes the way staff throughout the organisation communicate with you?
 - Why/Why not
- Do you think you have a good rapport with your subordinates?
 - What strategies do you use?

Comparisons:

- Does your communication in this role differ to other leadership positions you have held?
- Is the way people talk to you in this role different from other organisations you have been in?

CEO Communication:

- Has the way people communicate with you changed since you have become a CEO?
- Do you think that age and generation impact on your communication?
- Has your level of disclosure (openness) changed since being in this role?
- Does role enable you to do any mentoring?

Female Communication:

- Has the way you communicate been shaped by the fact that you are a female CEO?
Why?
- Do you think people talk to you differently because you're a woman?
- If a man was in your position in your organisation do you think that communication would be different?
- What advantages do you think being a female gives you in a CEO role?
- What types of communication do you think females are better at/find easier?
- Do you agree with the stereotypes people make about women leaders? E.g women have greater emotional intelligence?
- End question – in your experience in this organisation to what degree do you think sex impacts your communication
-How?

Appendix 4 – Human Ethics



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Rebecca Robinson
Telephone: +64 03 369 4588, Extn 94588
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: HEC 2018/55/LR

27 August 2018

Maxine Osborn
Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Maxine

Thank you for submitting your low risk application to the Human Ethics Committee for the research proposal titled "Communication Experiences of Female Leaders in Different Gender Mix Organisations".

I am pleased to advise that this application has been reviewed and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 16th August 2018.

With best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

R. Robinson
pp.

Professor Jane Maidment
Chair, Human Ethics Committee